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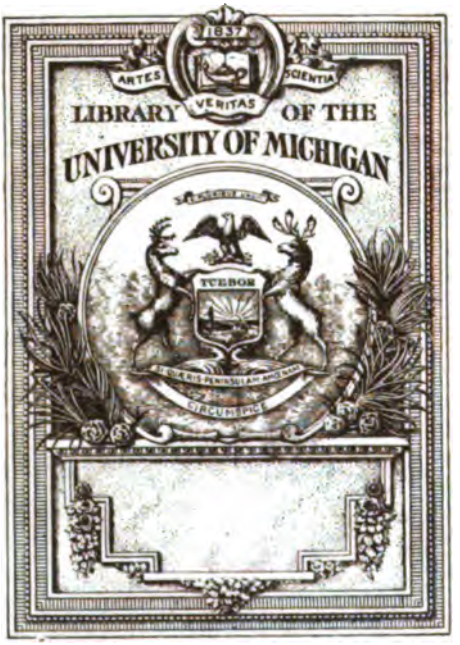
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WORKS

OF

THOMAS SECKER, LL.D.

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SERMON XLIII.

The Importance of a careful Examination of our Principles of Religion.

1 Thess. v. 21, 22.

Prove all things: hold fast that which is good: abstain from all appearance of evil.

By the extensive word, *all*, the apostle in this place evidently means no more, than *all things* which may be right or wrong in point of conscience. And by *proving them* he means, not that we should try them both by experience, which would be an absurd and pernicious direction: but that we should examine them by our faculty of judgment, which is a wise and useful exhortation. Accordingly, Christianity recommends itself to us at first sight by this peculiar presumption of its being the true religion, that it makes application to men as reasonable creatures, and claims our assent on account of the proofs which it offers. By these alone it prevailed originally: on these it still relies; and requires faith for the principle of our obedience, only because it produces evidence for the ground of our faith. Now such an institution surely is intitled to receive the fair treatment which it gives, when it asks of mankind no more than this; that they should first consider well the several obligations they are under; then adhere to whatever they find to be enjoined them; and lastly avoid whatever they conceive to be forbidden: which momentous duties I shall endeavour to explain and enforce in three discourses on the text.

That beings, capable of thought, are obliged to think, is very obvious: that they should think with the greatest care on subjects of the greatest importance, is equally so: and the question, what obligations we are under, is plainly of the utmost importance. For our behaviour, and consequently our happi-

neſs, depends on the determination of it. Therefore we are juſt as much bound to conduct our underſtanding well, as our tempers or outward actions. And the opportunities given us of ſhowing, either diligence in procuring information, and fairneſs in judging upon it, or the contrary, are trials, which God hath appointed, of every one's moral character; and perhaps the chief trials, which ſome have to go through. Every inſtance, greater or leſs, of wilfully diſregarding truth, inſtead of ſeeking and embracing it, argues a proportionable depravity of heart; whether the diſlike be manifeſted in a ſtudious oppoſition to it, or an indolent ſcorn of it.

There are ſome who openly profeſs an utter contempt of all inquiry! deſpiſe ſuch as are ſolicitous either about belief or practice, and even affect a thoughtleſſneſs, which they find to be grown faſhionable. Now really, if this be an accompliſhment, it is one, that whoever will may eaſily be maſter of. But ſurely men ought to think ſeriouſly once for all, before they reſolve for the reſt of their days to think no more. There are ſtrong appearances, that many things of great conſequence are incumbent on us. No one can be ſure, that theſe appearances are fallacious, till he hath examined into them. Many, who have, are fully perſuaded of their truth. And, if there be ſuch things in the world as folly and guilt, it can never be either wiſe or innocent to diſdain giving ourſelves any trouble about the matter, and take it abſolutely for granted, that we may live as we will: a deciſion of ſuch a nature, that were it made on ſeemingly ever ſo good grounds, it would be very fit to review them well from time to time, for fear of a miſtake that muſt be fatal.

And if a general neglect of conſidering our conduct be criminal, a neglect of conſidering any part of it muſt, in its degree, be criminal alſo. Many have weighed carefully, and obſerve conſcientiouſly, ſome duties of life; but will not reflect a moment, whether it be allowable for them to behave, in other points, as they do. And yet, if any moral obligation deſerves regard, every ſuch obligation deſerves it equally. And when the queſtion comes to be, what is indeed ſuch, and what not, impartial reaſon, well directed, muſt be judge; not inclination or fancy: for if theſe can make things lawful, nothing will be unlawful. And therefore, inſtead of ever following ſuch guides implicitly, we ſhould always have the greater ſuſpicion that

we

we are going wrong, the more vehemently they preſs us to go forward.

Some again have ſearched, and obtained ſatisfaction, they ſay, concerning every article of morals; but will not concern themſelves about religion. Yet ſurely the inquiry, whether there be a wiſe and juſt ruler of this univerſe or not; and if there be, what homage he expects from us; and what we have to hope or fear from him, according as we pay it, or refuſe it; is as material a one, as ever was made. And on what pretence any one can doubt whether it be worth making, and reverently too, it is impoſſible to ſay.

Another ſort declare, that they have a ſettled conviction of natural religion, (would God they would aſk their hearts, what feelings of it they cultivate, what marks of it they ſhow,) but treat revelation at the ſame time, as totally unworthy of being conſidered. Yet that our heavenly Father can give us very uſeful information both of what we did not know before, and of what we could not know elſe, is at leaſt as credible, as it is certain that we can give ſuch one to another. And that he may with juſtice give ſome men greater advantages than others by ſupernatural diſcoveries, is no leſs clear than that he may give them ſuch advantages by their natural abilities and circumſtances. If then God may do this for us, it is a moſt intereſting queſtion, whether he hath or not; and an indiſpenſable precept, which the words, immediately preceding the text, expreſs when joined with it. *Deſpiſe not prophecyings: prove all things.*

But there is yet a different ſet of perſons, who confeſs, that both our attention, and our aſſent, are due to Chriſtianity in general, but who are againſt diſcuſſing any of its doctrines in particular. Provided men know but enough of it, to keep them well-behaved and quiet, nothing further, they conceive, is needful: whatever ſentiments about ſpeculative points happen to prevail, ſhould be ſupported, and no diſputes allowed to break in upon the peace of the world. Now it is very true, that ſociety ſhould not be diſturbed by contentions about opinions, as it hath often been moſt dreadfully: nor men be perplexed about queſtions of mere curioſity, inſtead of learning better things; nor frightened, or eſtranged from each other by laying ſtreſs on points of more nicety. And the New Teſtament ſtrongly forbids all theſe things. But ſtill, if the Chriſtian religion be from heaven, it cannot be a matter of indifference,

what its real doctrines are: nor can its author have given us the liberty of profeſſing others in their ſtead. Some of them may ſeem, and perhaps may be, though that doth not follow, of ſmall conſequence to the purpoſes of common life: but if they convey to us juſt notions of God, and of thoſe relations of ours to him, which are never the leſs real for not being diſcoverable by reaſon; if they inſtruct us in the duties, which thoſe relations require, and form us to that ſtate of mind, which he knows to be requiſite for enjoying the happineſs of another world, be their connexion with this world ever ſo little, ſurely they are important enough. Some of them alſo have doubts and difficulties attending them; as even the doctrines of natural religion, and the duties of morality have: but theſe were intended to furniſh us with opportunities of ſhewing uprightneſs in judging where we are qualified to judge; and humility in ſubmitting our ſhallow imaginations to unfathomable wiſdom, where we are not; the exerciſe of which virtues here will fit us for a plentiful reward hereafter. And would men but once prevail on themſelves to expreſs their thoughts on controverted ſubjects with decency and candour: ſociety, inſtead of ſuffering by debates, would receive much benefit. Chriſtianity would be better underſtood; and therefore more juſtly eſteemed, and more diſcreetly practiſed: it would be built on firmer foundations, and therefore be ſecurer againſt all aſſaults.

There ſtill remains a larger number of Chriſtians, I mean the advocates of the church of *Rome*, who are indeed by no means indifferent what doctrines are held, but vehemently oppoſe entering into any diſquiſitions about them; and would have us, inſtead of that, firſt look out for an infallible guide, and then follow him blindfold. But they have never been able to ſhow, that ſuch infallibility exiſts amongſt men; or even to agree with each other determinately, in whom they ſhould place it. And the ſcripture, far from directing us to examine this one claim, and after that never to examine more, directs us in many places, but particularly in the text, by as plain words as can be written, to *prove*, that is, examine, *all things*. But were this otherwiſe, their pretenſion will require no long examination: for it is in vain to argue that ſuch or ſuch men cannot miſtake, when it notoriouſly appears in fact, that they have miſtaken.

Every

Every article, therefore, both of morals and religion, may and ought to be tried, in ſuch manner as can be reaſonably expected from the parts, attainments and circumſtances of each perſon: and concerning this, we ſhould both judge modeſtly for ourſelves, and conſult others with deference. For attempting too much will be more likely to miſlead, than improve us.

But then the more general and important this duty of inquiry is, the more care muſt be taken to perform it aright. For many pique themſelves on a moſt unbounded zeal for freedom of thought, and a thorough ſearch into things, who yet by no means deſerve the character which they aſſume.

Some of them fancy they have thought very freely upon religion. Now this is, in one ſenſe, treating it freely indeed, but no proof of thinking upon it at all. For mere diſbelieving is no more an evidence of having examined, than mere believing is. However, at leaſt, they ſay, they have thrown off the prejudices, in which they were bred up: and throwing off prejudices muſt be right. But then they are many of them for extirpating, under that odious name, original natural diſpoſitions in the heart of man. For inſtance: the propenſity, that we all experience to revere an inviſible power; the eſteem that we all feel of juſtice and truth, of mercy and goodneſs, of honour and decency; are as real conſtituents of our inward frame, as any paſſion or appetite, that belongs to it. Yet theſe principles, which direct us to every thing that is good, they would perſuade us to root out as prejudices; while they plead earneſtly for the inclinations, that continually prompt us to vice, as dictates of nature. And a part of our nature undoubtedly they are: but a part lamentably diſordered; and which, in its beſt eſtate, the other and higher was evidently deſigned to govern and reſtrain. At leaſt, to ſet out with taking the contrary for granted; and condemn things at once, as groundleſs prepoſſeſſions, which have ſo reſpectable an appearance of being the primitive guides of life, is by no means inquiring freely.

Another falſe notion concerning prejudices, though at firſt ſight a plauſible one, is, that we ought to diveſt ourſelves of all deſire to find religion true, before we go about to judge of it. Now it is impoſſible, that a perſon of a worthy mind ſhould do ſo. He may indeed, and will take care, not to be miſled by his deſire. But he neither can, nor ought to be indifferent concerning a point, on which his own eternal happineſs,

neſs, and that of every good man upon earth, depends. Nor is this the only caſe, far from it, in which we are bound to wiſh on one ſide, and yet determine fairly between both. In judicial proceedings, a benevolent magiſtrate will conſtantly wiſh, that whoever is accuſed before him may prove innocent: notwithſtanding which, he will try his cauſe with the moſt upright impartiality.

But if this degree of prepoſſeſſion in favour of religion be right, how exceedingly wrong muſt prepoſſeſſion againſt it be! What are we to think of thoſe, and what have they cauſe to think of themſelves, who can take pleaſure in that comfortleſs and horrid view of things, which infidelity gives; and triumph in believing, that *there is* no *reward for the righteous*, no *God that judgeth the earth* *! One would hope they do not ſee diſtinctly, and yet it is exceedingly viſible, what malevolence to human kind rejoicing in a thought of this nature implies.

Or if they do not wiſh againſt religion in general, yet, if they wiſh againſt the Chriſtian religion, they are enemies to a doctrine, which confirms very powerfully all the great truths that reaſon teaches; which clears up, intirely to our advantage, many tormenting doubts, that reaſon leaves us involved in; and which, however it may have been perverted, (as every good thing in the world hath) undeniably is in its nature an inſtitution the moſt completely fitted to make men happy in themſelves and one another, in the preſent ſtate and the future, that ever was. Did we then ſee thoſe, who profeſs themſelves unſatisfied about its evidence, afraid it was inſufficient; grieved that the proofs appeared no ſtronger, and the objections ſo conſiderable; this would ſhew a mind, which the ſcripture calls *noble* †, *not far from the kingdom of God* ‡. And at times, the moſt of them affect to ſeem thus diſpoſed; and will aſſure ſuch as preſs them upon the ſubject, that, of all things, they wiſh they could but be ſo happy as to believe. But why then were they in ſuch haſte to diſbelieve, and moſt of them to act viciouſly upon their diſbelief? Why would they not hear and conſider firſt? Why will they not now reconſider the ſubject, and acquaint themſelves with the defences of our faith, as well as the attacks made upon it? Why do they delight in making converts of all that they can? Why are they ſo prone to ridicule,

* Pſalm lviii. 10. † Acts xvii. 2. ‡ Mark xii. 34.

cule, or calumniate thoſe, whom they cannot? Such ſymptoms look very ſuſpicious; and ſhould induce thoſe, who are conſcious of them, to put the queſtion home to themſelves, whether this great good will to religion be really the temper, with which they have ever inquired into it, or do now inwardly think of it; or whether indeed their profeſſions are only a ſpecious manner of talking, occaſionally taken up to ſerve a turn. If the latter be the caſe, they muſt, in order to be fair doubters, guard againſt another ſort of prejudices, than they imagined.

Some prejudices, either right or wrong, will take hold of us very ſoon. And therefore it is fit, that, as far as we can, we ſhould examine the foundation of our early opinions; but with equity, with candour, not with a reſolution beforehand to find fault: for as they are never the truer for our being educated in them, they are never the falſer either. But indeed the education of many hath placed them ſo very little in the way, either of receiving prejudices, or hearing arguments in favour of religion; that they have need to begin with throwing off prejudices to its diſadvantage; and ſhould ſuſpect that much more may be ſaid for it, than the little, which hath come to their knowledge. It is probable, that they might have ſome impreſſions of piety, ſuch as they were, made upon them by the ſuperintendents of their childhood; and it is poſſible that ſomething may have been added ſince to theſe impreſſions, by their attendance, if haply they have been ſuffered to attend on publick inſtruction. But as ſoon as they begin to ſee a little more of the world, and obſerve what paſſes around them, what a number of things will they meet with, likely to give them a much ſtronger bias towards infidelity, than the forms of a common education have given them towards faith! They will find but too many declared unbelievers, and even teachers of unbelief: very many, who, if they do not expreſsly deny chriſtianity, ſpeak and act as if they deſpiſed it; and few, in compariſon, that vouchſafe it a ſerious and uniform regard. The abuſes of religion they will hear moſt invidiouſly magnified; the benefits of it moſt artfully and maliciouſly depreciated; the public worſhip of God condemned, as idle formality; the private, as enthuſiaſtic folly; the miniſters of his word repreſented as objects only of contempt or abhorrence: And the conſequence hath been, that, by thinking of us in a manner, which,

which, with all our faults, God forbid we ſhould deſerve, multitudes are come to think of the goſpel, that we preach, in a manner, which they certainly ought not, did we deſerve ever ſo ill. When prejudices from without, like theſe, are added to the vehement ones within, which vanity forms againſt every thing that would humble it, and paſſions and appetites againſt every thing that would reſtrain them; it is eaſy to perceive, where the danger of partiality lies; and what prepoſſeſſions the company they have kept, the books they have read, the lives they have led, make neceſſary to be baniſhed by too many, if they would become fair enquirers.

Let it therefore be examined, on what foundation the notions, that we have learned, of religion and virtue ſtand. But let it be examined alſo, on what foundation the prevailing notions, which contradict religion and virtue ſtand. For to lay it down as a maxim, that theſe are well grounded, and diſcard the former merely on that preſumption, is monſtrouſly unreaſonable. We own it to be highly proper, that men ſhould aſk themſelves, why they believe: but it is equally proper for them to aſk, why they diſbelieve. Undoubtedly they ſhould not be bigots and zealots: but then they ſhould not be ſo againſt religion, any more than for it. Implicit faith is wrong: but implicit infidelity is yet more ſo. And whatever fault may be found with the truſt, which it is ſaid the godly repoſe in their ſpiritual guides; it is full as poſſible, and perhaps in proportion full as frequent, for the ungodly to follow one another on to their lives end, with their eyes cloſe ſhut, each in the moſt ſervile reliance on what his leader tells him; only with the ridiculous addition of admiring moſt immoderately, all the way, their own wonderful freedom of thought.

By ſuch conſiderations as theſe, men ſhould prepare their minds for beginning to inquire. And when they do begin, it is an important rule, not to be too haſty in drawing concluſions, eſpecially bold ones. Viewing things on every ſide, obſerving how far conſequences reach, and proceeding to collect and hear evidence, till reaſon ſaith there needs no more, is grievous labour to indolence and impatience, and by no means anſwers the ends of conceit and affectation. A ſhorter way therefore is commonly taken. Some objection of minute philoſophy ſtrikes their thoughts unexpectedly, or comes recommended to them as highly faſhionable: and whether a ſolid anſwer can be

given

given to it, they never aſk. Some argument, urged in favour of religion, proves or ſeems to be a weak one: and, without more ado, they infer, that the reſt are no ſtronger. Some things, which have been generally received, they find or apprehend are falſe or doubtful: and therefore nothing, they imagine, is certain. Some text of ſcripture, poſſibly tranſcribed or tranſlated amiſs, is hard to defend, or to reconcile with ſome other; and therefore they ſlight the whole. Some doctrine, which revelation is ſaid to teach, appears hard to underſtand or admit, or is capable of a ludicrous turn; and therefore immediately they reject, not only that, but others not in the leaſt connected with it; throw aſide at once the intire ſyſtem; and, it may be, plunge headlong into vice. Yet, all the while, revelation perhaps doth not teach this doctrine, and they are offended ſolely at a phantom of their own dreſſing up; or perhaps teaches it with great reaſon, for any thing which they can ever prove to the contrary. For in a nature ſo unſearchable as that of God, and a ſcheme ſo vaſt as that of his univerſal government, there muſt be many things, which creatures of our limited faculties cannot approach towards comprehending; and merely for want of comprehending, may fancy to be full of incredibilities, which, could we but know more, or would we but remember that we know ſo little, would inſtantly vaniſh. In matters, therefore, which we underſtand ſo very imperfectly, to ſet up human imagination againſt divine authority; to rely on crude notions, that things are impoſſible, which proper teſtimony ſhews to be true in fact; or that God cannot be, or do, what, by his own declarations, he is, and hath done, betrays a diſpoſition widely diſtant from the modeſty which becomes us.

Beſides, were the difficulties which attend the ſyſtem of religion, more conſiderable than they are; yet we ſhould take notice, that difficulties attend the contrary ſyſtem alſo; and conſider, ſince one muſt be true, which is moſt likely to be ſo. If there be objections againſt a creation and a providence; are there not greater againſt ſuppoſing, that the world could have exiſted without being created, or continue all this time without a providence? If there be ſomewhat ſcarce conceivable in the doctrine of a future life and judgement: yet upon the whole, which of the two is moſt probable, that a wiſe and good God will finally recompenſe men according to their works, or

that he will not? If there be things in the goſpel-revelation, for which it is hard to account, it is ſo hard to account for any thing upon earth, as how it ſhould come to have ſuch aſtoniſhing proofs, internal and external, of being true, if it be really falſe? They who think the creed of a Chriſtian ſo ſtrange and myſterious, let them think a while, what the creed of an infidel muſt be, if he would only lay aſide his general pretences of impoſture and enthuſiaſm, and credulity and bigotry, which thrown out at random will diſcredit all evidence of hiſtory alike; and anſwer in particular, how, on his own hypotheſis, he accounts for all the ſeveral notorious facts, on which our religion is built. I am perſuaded, there hath never appeared yet amongſt men ſo incomprehenſible a collection of tenets, as this would produce. Men may indeed be too eaſy of belief: but it is juſt as great a weakneſs to be too full of ſuſpicion. Reverence for antiquity may impoſe upon us: but fondneſs for novelty may do the ſame thing. Undoubtedly we ſhould be on the watch againſt pious frauds: but againſt impious ones too. For whatever diſhoneſty the advocates of religion have been either juſtly or unjuſtly charged with, the oppoſers of it have given full proof, at leaſt of their inclination not to come ſhort of them. Whoever therefore would proceed in the right path, muſt be attentive to the dangers on each ſide.

Perhaps this may ſeem to require more pains than moſt perſons are capable of. But of an upright diſpoſition every one is capable: and with this, common abilities and leiſure will ſuffice to judge concerning the neceſſary points of faith and practice. Few indeed, or none, can judge of any thing without relying in ſome meaſure on the knowledge and veracity of others. And what muſt we think of human nature, or what will become of human ſociety, if we can take nothing on each other's word? We ſhould hearken to no one indeed who aſſerts plain abſurdities. And we ſhould always judge for ourſelves as far as we can. But we ſhould not affect to do it farther. Where we viſibly want, either parts or learning, or time for it, as we frequently do in worldly affairs of great moment, no leſs than in religion, we are both allowed and obliged to depend on others. Only we muſt obſerve theſe two directions: that we firſt pay a due reſpect to that legal authority, under which providence hath placed us: and then chuſe, according to the beſt of our underſtandings, the worthieſt and wiſeſt

wiſeſt and moſt conſiderate perſons to be our conductors. For as we ſhould never haſtily run after uncommiſſioned guides, ſo above all things we ſhould beware of artful or ſelf-ſufficient, of raſh and impetuous ones: which laſt, however it happens, man are peculiarly apt to follow, though almoſt ſure of being led by them, not only wrong, but great lengths in what is wrong: whereas there are no plainer rules of behaviour than theſe, that in proportion as we are in the dark, we ſhould go on gently; and wherever there may be hazard, keep on the ſafer ſide.

He that will conduct himſelf thus, may ſoon make large advances in religious knowledge: and wherever he ſtops, needs not be uneaſy. Though the arguments, which he hath for his faith, may not be the ſtrongeſt: yet a *tree*, but weakly rooted, often *brings forth good fruit*: and if it doth, will never *be hewn down, and caſt into the fire.** Though he may be ignorant of many things, and doubt or even err concerning many others, yet they may be of ſmall importance; or, though of great, yet having uſed a competent care to inform himſelf, he will obtain pardon. We cannot indeed ſay with exactneſs, how much of their time and pains men are bound to ſpend upon examination, any more than how much of their wealth in works of charity, and the leſs, as both duties vary according to the circumſtances of every individual. But let each conſult his conſcience, with a ſerious deſire of being told the truth, whether it hath been, and is now his habitual endeavour to determine and to act as rightly as he can: and, if the anſwer be clearly in his favour, when he is neither diſpoſed to frighten nor flatter himſelf, let him truſt in God, *and be at peace.*† For *like as a father pitieth his children, ſo the Lord pitieth them that fear him.*‡

Not that, after all, it is indifferent, whether we fall into errors concerning religion, or eſcape them. For both miſtakes and bare ignorance, where they are accompanied with little or no guilt, may often be followed by great diſadvantages. Wrong notions in the underſtanding may produce wrong movements in the heart: which, even when they will not bring down upon us future puniſhment, may unfit us for certain degrees of future reward. And, on the contrary, a larger portion of piety and virtue, and therefore of heavenly felicity, may

* Matth. iii. 10. vii. 19. † Job. xxii. 21. ‡ Pſal. ciii. 13.

prove to be the natural conſequence of a more extenſive acquaintance with goſpel truths. So that, in the reaſon of things, as well as the ſure foundation of divine promiſes, good Chriſtians are intitled to expect thoſe diſtinguiſhed glories in a better world, for which, others, though, in proportion to their talents, truly good, may not be qualified.

But ſtill it is allowable to hope, and to rejoice in hoping, that a being unſpeakably gracious will confer ſome meaſure of happineſs hereafter on all the ſons of men, who have not made themſelves incapable of it; and that neither involuntary nor excuſable miſapprehenſions will exclude any from it. If indeed, under colour of reaſoning freely, men will argue fallaciouſly, conclude precipitable, and behave preſumptuouſly; talk and do what they pleaſe without modeſty or fear, and ſet themſelves up, on this merit, for the only aſſertors of liberty, when in truth they are willing ſlaves to a wicked mind; theſe, of all men, *have no cloak for their ſin**. But the virtuous and humble inquirer, who ſtudies to conduct his underſtanding with impartial care firſt, and his life with inoffenſive ſincerity afterwards, yet conſcious of his many failings, begs for pardon and ſtrength to be given him in ſuch manner as his Maker ſees fit, may ſurely comfort himſelf with pleaſing expectations of acceptance after death. *As many*, therefore, *as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Iſrael of God* †.

* John xv. 22. † Gal. vi. 16.

SERMON XLIV.

Firmness in the Practice of Religion and Virtue.

1 Thess. v. 21, 22.

Prove all things: hold faſt that which is good; abſtain from all appearance of evil.

THE firſt duty of reaſonable creatures, with reſpect to religion, is, informing themſelves, as fully as their natural abilities, their improvements in knowledge, and their conditions of life permit, concerning its truth, and the doctrines it teaches. Multitudes are unable to proceed far in this inquiry: of the reſt, ſome totally neglect it, ſome carry it on with leſs care and integrity, or fewer advantages, than others. And hence it comes to paſs, that different perſons think upon the ſubject in very different manners: and even the ſame perſon, in progreſs of time, very differently from himſelf. But then every ſtate of mind, that men can be in, relative to theſe matters, hath its proper obligations belonging to it: and, for want of paying due regard to them, they whoſe opinions are right may be very bad in their practice; and they whoſe opinions are wrong, much worſe, than even their own notions, by any juſt conſequence, allow them to be. Not uncommonly indeed the goodneſs of mens nature prevails, through God's mercy, in ſome points, over the ill tendency of their principles; and makes them better than they profeſs themſelves. But much oftener they run into ſuch behaviour, as muſt be unwarrantable, according to the very doctrines which they have embraced. And therefore every one ſhould conſider well, to what ſort of conduct theſe really direct him, and from what they reſtrain him. Men may think, they could not help being of the opinions they are: but if they take ſtill greater liberties, than their opinions lead them to; inſtead of ſuſpecting, that poſſibly they

they may lead them too far: this they muſt know to be their own fault; and, while they indulge it, one doth not ſee, what they will ſtop at: whereas keeping carefully within the bounds, which their judgements ſets them, will be the beſt excuſe they can have, in their preſent way of thinking; and the likelieſt means of diſcerning and amending the errors of it.

Having therefore laid before you, in the firſt place, the duty of *proving all things*, and the general diſpoſition of mind with which it ſhould be done: I proceed now to the conſequent duty of *holding faſt that which is good*, and *abſtaining from all appearance of evil*. And as the appearances of good and evil muſt vary, according to the notions which are eſpouſed about them; it will be uſeful to conſider theſe of unbelievers, as well as believers: for which purpoſe, there muſt be ſome extraordinary ſuppoſitions made: but I hope the truly pious will neither think them ſhocking, nor uſeleſs; being introduced only for the ſake of ſuggeſting to them ſuch things, as though they want not for themſelves, or for others like them, they may perhaps employ to good effect for convincing or ſilencing infidels and libertines, when occaſion requires: and there hath ſeldom been more occaſion, than at preſent.

To begin then with imagining a worſe caſe, than perhaps is poſſible. Were any one perſuaded, not only that all religion is groundleſs, but that virtue and vice, right and wrong, are mere words without meaning: yet even ſuch a one, if he did not think wiſdom and folly, pleaſure and pain, empty ſounds too; would have ſome rule of conduct, ſo far as it reached. Still it would be a matter of ſerious conſideration, what behaviour promiſes the moſt happineſs, upon the whole, to ſuch beings, placed in ſuch a world, as we are. And our preſent intereſt here, had we no other guide, far from permitting us to do every mad thing, that paſſion, appetites or fancies, prompt us to, would direct us, in a great meaſure, to a courſe of honeſty, friendlineſs and ſobriety. For not only life and health, and ſafety and quiet: of which no other method can poſſibly give us, in general, near ſo good a proſpect; are of much too high importance, to be hazarded wantonly: but reputation alſo is a matter of no ſmall value; and peace within of greater ſtill. Now ſuppoſe there were no reaſon in the leaſt for any one to feel ſatisfaction in doing good natured and juſt things, or uneaſineſs from the reflection of having done cruel and baſe ones;

yet,

yet, as in fact, almoſt, if not abſolutely, all perſons do feel both to aim at the former, and avoid the latter, is, without regard to principle, a dictate of common prudence.

But farther, whatever ſome may think of moral obligation themſelves, they have many reaſons to deſire that the world about them ſhould think highly of it. For though diſcretion, abſtracted from ſenſe of duty, might reaſonably, in moſt caſes, reſtrain thoſe, with whom we are concerned from uſing us ill; yet it will reſtrain them but in few inſtances; and then very imperfectly. So that whoever is conſiderate, will be extremely unwilling to weaken the bonds of human ſociety: which he will find, at beſt, are by no means too ſtrong. And therefore, ſhould he think it his own intereſt to be wicked; yet if he be wiſe he will never attempt to make one ſingle perſon like him, beſides thoſe whom he abſolutely needs for aſſociates: and even of ſuch he will beware: for he hath *taught them an evil leſſon againſt himſelf* *. But ſpreading his opinions farther, he will look on as the fillieſt of vanities: and be earneſtly deſirous, that others ſhould act upon principle, whatever he doth himſelf: that his friends ſhould be faithful and affectionate, his ſervants honeſt and careful, his children dutiful and regular. And they, who, in the fancied ſuperiority of their knowledge, teach thoſe about them, or thoſe with whom they converſe, to be profligate; by expreſſing, either deſignedly or careleſly, a contempt of virtue; well deſerve the return, they often meet with, for ſuch inſtructions.

Nay indeed every prudent man, be his private way of thinking ever ſo bad, will be ſolicitous to perſerve in the world, not only morals; but, for the ſake of morals, what is the main ſupport of them, religion too: and that religion, which is the likelieſt to ſupport them. Though he conceive it to be falſe, he will reſpect it as beneficial, were he to imagine this or that part of it hurtful; he would ſtill moderate this zeal againſt them, ſo as not to deſtroy the influence of the reſt. For if believing ſome things may do harm in the world, believing others may do good. And if any thing whatever can do much good, and no harm: it is the perſuaſion, that we live continually under the eye of an infinitely powerful and wiſe, juſt and good ruler; who hath ſent us a perſon of inconceivable dignity, on purpoſe to give us the fulleſt aſſurance of his rewarding all, who

* Eccles. ix. 1.

who ſhall repent and amend, and puniſhing all who continue in wickedneſs, both here and to eternity. To do or ſay what may weaken the impreſſions of ſuch a doctrine, muſt, on all ſuppoſitions, be the groſſeſt folly. And yet ſome, who have the higheſt opinion of their own underſtandings, are perpetually guilty of it: and ſeem not to diſcern, how impoſſible it is, that the world ſhould never be influenced, to any good purpoſe, by what the daily converſation and example of thoſe, who are likely to be reckoned the more knowing part of the world, encourage the reſt to deſpiſe.

But I dwell too long on the ſuppoſition that men can be abſolutely perſuaded, that religion and virtue are nothing. For though many have wiſhed, and ſome ſaid it, when the wickedneſs of their lives hath driven them to that refuge: and though others may have been led, by love of ſingularity, or indignation againſt reigning ſuperſtitions, to advance the ſame notion: yet neither their numbers, nor their abilities, have been comparatively at all conſiderable: and beſides, few of them appear to have thoroughly convinced themſelves, at leaſt for any time, of what they affirmed: nor is their pretence of ground for ſuch conviction to reſt on. Doubts indeed may be raiſed, ſuch as they are. And therefore let us conſider, in the ſecond place, the obligations of thoſe, who are doubtful about theſe matters. Now uncertainty, as it implies an apprehenſion, that they may not be true; implies alſo an apprehenſion, that they may. And the loweſt degree of likelihood, the very poſſibility, that God is, and that virtue is his law, ſhould in all reaſon have a powerful influence on the minds and conduct of men. Perhaps they fluctuate, only becauſe they have not taken due pains to inform themſelves. They are ignorant; not religion and morals deſtitute of proof; and inſtead of ſlighting, they ſhould ſtudy them. Or ſuppoſing, after ſome inquiry, that they cannot determine: this happens in many caſes, where further inquiry affords full evidence; concerning the main point at leaſt, if not every particular. But were we to remain ever ſo much at a loſs when we have done our beſt: not knowing things to be true, is an exceedingly different ſtate from knowing them to be falſe; how apt ſoever we are to confound the one with the other. In the affairs of this world, men may be quite in ſuſpence about matters, which yet are very important realities: and it may be of the utmoſt conſequence to them, whether, during

during that ſuſpence, they act rightly or not: nay, while it is ever ſo uncertain, what they are to think; it may be very clear how they are to behave: and, by following or tranſgreſſing that rule, they may as truly deſerve well or ill, as by any other part of their conduct. Why then may not the caſe be the ſame, in reſpect to thoſe, who have not arrived at certainty concerning religious and moral obligations? why may not ſuch doubts be one part of the trial of their behaviour; as well as other perplexities are of the behaviour of other perſons?

Being profane and vicious, becauſe they do not ſee clearly, is determining, inſtead of doubting: and determining on the ſide, that is not only prejudicial to all around them, but dangerous to themſelves. For it is exceedingly little, were all things well conſidered, that we can almoſt ever get by wickedneſs: but what we may ſuffer by it, is infinite. The fruits of it in this life are uſually found very bitter: nor is there any ſhadow of proof, but another may ſucceed it. And if there ſhould, innocence here cannot poſſibly hurt us hereafter: but guilt runs a double riſque; not only as uneaſy reflections naturally follow it, but as farther puniſhment may be juſtly inflicted on it. The ſlighteſt ſenſe of duty, that we can experience, ſhould have made us at leaſt ſuſpect, that ſo peculiar a feeling as that, is not to ſtand for nothing in our compoſition.

And if men will do, what they are told, by a ſecret voice within, they ought not; it is fit they ſhould take the conſequences, in the next world, as well as the preſent. For it is knowing they did ill, not knowing they ſhould be condemned for it, that makes their condemnation juſt. And though acute and ſubtle reaſoners may eaſily build up a ſpecious ſyſtem of doubts and queſtions, yet this is a poor defence to reſt the whole of their beings upon: eſpecially as men have ſo irreſiſtible a conviction, that right and wrong are notions of great conſequence, when their own rights are invaded; that they cannot in earneſt think them idle words, or matters of indifference, when their neighbours are concerned, let them ſay what they will.

And therefore we may now go on to a third ſuppoſition; that men acknowledge the obligation of morals, but not of religion; and let us conſider, what they are to do. They almoſt univerſally take the liberty of doing one very bold and wrong thing, of moſt extenſive bad effect. They model their notions

of morals, juſt according to their own fancy; and reduce them into as narrow a compaſs, as they think convenient. So that, while they talk very highly of virtue, they practiſe little or nothing of it: or, if they obſerve ſome duties ſtrictly, yet others, though, it may be, ſcarce of leſs moment, but leſs agreeable to them, they neither regard, nor acknowledge, but hold them in utter contempt. Thus one part of the world tranſgreſſes the rules of ſobriety and chaſtity; another lives wholly to idle and expenſive amuſements; a third is wickedly ſelfiſh or ill-natured in private affairs; a fourth unreaſonably vehement in public ones; and yet all contrive to overlook their own faults in theſe points, and admire their own goodneſs in others: whereas to be truly good, we muſt be ſo in every thing alike. But inclination eaſily prevails over principle, where it hath not the ſanction of religion to ſtrengthen it. And they, who profeſs nothing beyond morals, not only are deſtitute of that higher aid; but, though their lives fully ſhow how much they want it, very commonly affect a ſcorn of it, no way to be accounted for. Suppoſe them doubtful even about natural religion; they muſt own, that, could it be proved, nothing in the world could influence men to virtue, like it. The fear of puniſhment, the hope of reward, from the King and Lord of all, the conſciouſneſs of living continually in his preſence, reverence of his perfect holineſs, love of his infinite goodneſs, reliance on his infinite wiſdom and power, are evidently the ſtrongeſt motives to right behaviour in every ſtation, that can be propoſed. They muſt own too, that the moſt thoughtful and able men in all ages, have held theſe motives to be well grounded; that the proofs in favour of them have conſiderable appearances of being concluſive: and, had they none, it would furniſh no cauſe of triumph, but of the deepeſt concern to every lover of virtue. Such a one therefore, however uncertain, will abhor the thought of treating ſo beneficial, ſo reſpectable a doctrine with contempt and ridicule: a ſhocking manner, which frivolous and wrong minds are ſtrangely fond of, on many unfit occaſions: and indulging it, thoroughly miſleads them from good ſenſe and diſcreet conduct, in every other article of life, as well as this. On the contrary, the ſlighteſt apprehenſion, that there only may be a juſt Ruler and Judge of the world, will give every well diſpoſed perſon great ſerioufneſs of heart in thinking upon theſe ſubjects, and great decency in ſpeaking

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of them: will incline him to ſeek for, and pay regard to, any degree of farther evidence concerning them, that is real, though perhaps it falls very ſhort of what he could wiſh: and will engage him, in the mean time, to behave with all the caution, that becomes his preſent ſituation. For, in a caſe of ſuch importance, even ſmall ſuſpicions ought to lay us under no ſmall reſtraints. Therefore he will let nothing ever eſcape him, which may induce others to throw off what he only doubts of: he will never ſolicit them to tranſgreſs the precepts of religion, while they acknowledge its authority; (things palpably wicked, and yet commonly done:) he will much more diſcourage a groundleſs neglect, than a groundleſs belief and practice of it: and he will think himſelf bound to act thus, not in prudence only, as even men of no principle are, but in conſcience alſo.

Theſe then are the duties of ſuch, if any ſuch there be, as admit the reality of virtue, and are doubtful concerning any thing farther. But indeed the generality of men profeſs to go ſo much farther, as to believe in natural religion, whatever they may think of chriſtianity. Let us therefore conſider, in the fourth place, what their obligations are. And we ſhall find an addition of very conſiderable ones incumbent on them, if they deſerve the title they aſſume, that of deiſts: in which word, according to its original import, regard to the Deity is principally, if not ſolely, expreſſed. But notwithſtanding this, it hath now for a long time ſignified much more determinately that men do not believe in Chriſt, than that they do believe in God. At leaſt, the belief of ſome, who would take it exceedingly ill to be called by a worſe name, amounts to little more, than a general confuſed perſuaſion of ſome ſort of firſt cauſe; probably an intelligent, perhaps a beneficent one too: but with ſcarce any diſtinct conception of his being the moral Governor of the world; much leſs any ſerious conviction, that he expects from us a temper and conduct of piety and virtue, as the only condition and means of our obtaining happineſs and avoiding miſery. Now, if their faith comes ſhort of this, they may very nearly as well have none at all: and if it comes up to this, it binds them indiſpenſably to be very different in their practice, from what they too commonly are: to cultivate in their hearts that fear and love, which the greatneſs and the goodneſs of God require: to pay him outwardly that homage

and worſhip, which our compound frame and the intereſts of ſociety call for: to beg of him both light to decern truth, and ſtrength to practiſe it: to make diligent and upright inquiry, what rules he hath pointed out for the conduct of man: to obſerve them all with the ſtricteſt care, however contrary to favourite inclinations; and to endeavour, as far as their influence reaches, that others alſo may feel and expreſs the ſame deep ſenſe of what they owe their Maker. Theſe are evident duties of real believers in him: do they perform them? They talk in the higheſt terms of the ſufficiency of reaſon, and the clearneſs with which natural light teaches every thing needful: Doth it *teach them to live ſoberly, righteouſly and godly**? It is but too eaſy for them to excel, in this reſpect, the generality of ſuch, as claim the title of Chriſtians. Why will they not take ſo honourable a method of putting us, and our profeſſion, out of countenance? They apprehend themſelves perhaps to have been far more ſtrict and careful than we, in forming their opinions: Why will they not manifeſt a proportionable ſtrictneſs in regulating their practice too? That would be a powerful evidence, both to the world and their own hearts, that they are ſincere in their pretenſions; that they do not reject the doctrines of the goſpel, merely to be excuſed from the duties of it: nor diſown every other law of life, but one within them, that they may be tied to nothing which they do not like. It would be uncharitable indeed to accuſe them of this, without proof: but they would do well to examine, whether they are not guilty of it. For it is a dangerous temptation: and one thing looks peculiarly ſuſpicious in many of them; that they have ſo little or no zeal for natural religion, and ſo vehement a zeal againſt revealed. Surely every one, who inwardly honours God, muſt be affected quite otherwiſe: and think both his conſcience and his character concerned in ſhowing the warmeſt attachment to the former, and the mildeſt equity in relation to the latter. If he not only ſuſpected, but imagined he knew the ſcripture-ſcheme to be falſe, ſtill he muſt own it to be a falſehood with the moſt amazing quantity of truth in it, that ever was: to give men, however it happens, beyond compariſon, the righteſt notions, the juſteſt precepts, the joyfulleſt encouragement, both in piety and morals, that ever ſyſtem did: and to have been

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* Tit. ii. 12.

the light of the world *, ſo far as appears, from the very beginning of it. Our only knowledge of the exiſtence of true religion in the earlieſt times, is from the diſcoveries recorded in the bible, as made to the Patriarchs. The Jewiſh diſpenſation afterwards was for many ages the main bulwark of faith *in one God, the Maker of heaven and earth:* nor probably was it from any other ſource, that the learned heathens derived their chief acquaintance with divine truths, after that they had forgotten the primitive tradition of them. Then laſtly, the chriſtian revelation overturned, when every thing elſe had appeared incapable of doing it, polytheiſm and idolatry, immoral ſuperſtition and profligate vice, wherever it was preached: and though it was indeed perverted for a time to patronize, in ſome degree, what it had deſtroyed; yet, by the native goodneſs of its conſtitution, it recovered again: and is now profeſſed by the church, of which we are members, in greater purity, then elſewhere upon earth, infidels themſelves being judges. If therefore they have in truth the affection, which they cannot deny but they ought to have, for genuine, moral, rational piety, they muſt honour this inſtitution, as an infinitely beneficial one; whether they confeſs it to be from heaven, or not: and, before they even wiſh it diſregarded, ſhould conſider, with no little ſerioufneſs, what effects muſt naturally follow. Would men really believe the being and providence of God, the obligations of virtue, and recompences of another life, the more firmly, for diſbelieving the goſpel? Would they underſtand their duty the better, for having no written rule of it? Would they judge about it the more impartially, for being left to make it out by their own fancies? Would they think of it the oftener, for never being inſtructed in it? Or is there not the ſtrongeſt appearance, that as from chriſtianity all the true knowledge of religion came, which even the enemies of chriſtianity have to boaſt of: ſo with it, all true regard to religion would be loſt again? We have been making in the preſent age ſome trial of this: and the effects, in private life and public, have been ſuch, that it is very hard to ſay, why either a good or a wiſe man ſhould ever want to ſee, what a farther trial would end in. But, at leaſt, ſuch a one would have much more concern that men ſhould believe and practiſe what reaſon and nature teach, than that they ſhould not believe and practiſe what

* John viii. 12.

what revelation teaches. And even if he could think himſelf obliged to declare againſt the latter, be the conſequences bad as they will, for the ſake of what he imagines truth; (which yet unbelievers are not apt to conſider as a point of ſuch indiſpenſable obligation, in other caſes;) he would however do it in a fair, and honourable, a decent manner: never miſrepreſent, through deſign or negligence, the doctrines, the evidence, or the teachers, of the goſpel; never ſtudy to expoſe them to the hatred of men by invectives, or to their contempt by ridicule: but inform himſelf about them with care, judge of them with candour, and ſpeak of them with good breeding and moderation. Widely different from this, is the conduct of our adverſaries; who take all methods without ſcruple to engage on their ſide, the reſentments of ſome, the avarice of others, the vanity of a third ſort, the ſenſuality of a fourth: and notwithſtanding, are able, it ſeems, to paſs themſelves upon unwary minds for great lovers of free inquiry: but, with a little attention, *by their fruits ye ſhall know them**. Would God they were cool and ſerious enough to know themſelves; and to remember, that neither doubt nor diſbelief can ever excuſe malice or diſhoneſty. Could they but bring their hearts into ſuch a diſpoſition, their objections would ſoon diminiſh, and our anſwers and arguments appear juſt and concluſive. To be ſatisfied of this, let us take a ſhort view of the caſe of chriſtianity.

God may certainly inform men of moſt uſeful things, which they did not, and could not, elſe know. He may certainly beſtow ſuperior advantages on ſome ages and nations, from motives of which we are ignorant, yet be ſufficiently gracious to all. He may ſee cauſe to reveal ſome things to us very imperfectly, and yet require us to believe what he hath revealed, though we are unable to comprehend what he hath not. He may give us commands, without adding the reaſons of them, which yet we are bound to obey: for we ourſelves do the ſame thing. He may appoint various forms of religion, ſuited to various places and times, full as properly as men appoint various forms of government. Farther ſtill, he might as juſtly permit us to become what we are, frail and mortal, by means of our firſt parents tranſgreſſion, as create us what we are, independently upon it. He is no leſs merciful in pardoning our ſins on account of the willing ſacrifice, which he hath provided for us,

* Matth. vii. 16.

us, than if he had pardoned them without any at all. He is no leſs authorized to demand of us what he will give us power to perform if we aſk it aright, than what we had power to perform of ourſelves. And he can as eaſily form our bodies anew, fitted for the purpoſes of a better life, as he could form them originally, fitted for the purpoſes of this. If ſome parts of his word appear hard to be underſtood, of ſmall uſe, or even hurtful; many parts of his works appear ſo too. If the revelation which he hath given us, hath often done harm inſtead of good: the reaſon and the affections which he hath given us, have done ſo likewiſe. Theſe few conſiderations, (and there are many obvious ones beſides, of the ſame kind,) would remove out of every honeſt mind moſt of the prejudices raiſed againſt the faith of chriſtians: which indeed, for the greateſt part, bear full as hard againſt the univerſal providence of God, even againſt thoſe proceedings of it, which we daily experience.

Then as to the evidence in favour of our religion: whatever difficulties may be ſtarted concerning particular points of it, taken ſingly; as there may, in the ſame manner, concerning any evidence in the world; yet lay together, in one view, the ſcripture-narration of things from the beginning; the conſiſtency and connection of the ſcheme, though carried on for ſo many thouſands of years; the admirable temper and character of the author of chriſtianity; the ſublimity and reaſonableneſs of its doctrines; the purity and benevolence of its precepts; the excellency of its means of improvement and grace; the eternal and true felicity of its rewards; the manifold atteſtations of its hiſtory and miracles; the wonderful propagation of it through the world, and its primitive influence on the ſouls and lives of men; the undeniable completion of many of its prophecies, and the evident room there is left for the fulfilling of the reſt: all theſe notorious facts, thus united and combined, can ſurely never fail to convince every impartial examiner, that the ſyſtem, they ſupport, muſt be from God, and that the ſupreme happineſs of man is to ſhare in its bleſſings. Now the weakeſt degree of ſuch a perſuaſion, far from being unworthy of regard, becauſe it is no ſtronger, ought in all juſtice to produce a moſt inquiſitive attention to farther proof; and, in the mean time, a conſcientious practice of what already appears credible. For, though any one's belief exceed his doubts but a little; yet, if it doth ſo at all, what prevails

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in his mind ought to regulate his conduct: and, acting thus, he will ſoon experience his faith to increaſe. Setting himſelf to keep the commandments, will ſhow him clearly his want of the mercies acknowledged in the creed: and labouring to behave ſuitably to his preſent light, will intitle him to that gracious promiſe of more, given by our bleſſed Lord: *If any man will do his will, he ſhall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God**.

The further and particular obligations of thoſe, who have acquired this knowledge, and are eſtabliſhed in the goſpel-faith, muſt be the ſubject of another diſcourſe. But the general direction for ſuch as are weak and leſs advanced, is undoubtedly that of the apoſtle: *Whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the ſame rule, let us mind the ſame thing; and, if in any thing ye be otherwiſe minded, God will reveal even this unto you*†.

* John vii. 17. † Phil. iii. 15, 16.

SERMON XLV.

Of Inoffensiveness and Innocence of Life and Manners.

1 Thess. v. 21, 22.

Prove all things: hold fast that which is good: abstain from all appearance of evil.

In discoursing on these words, I have laid before you the duty of carefully considering our obligations, in respect of piety and morals: and acting suitably to our convictions, on those heads. According as our notions of either vary, whether from our different means of knowledge, or different use of them, it must be expected, that our conduct should vary too. And yet I have shown you, that, were it possible for men to disbelieve the authority both of religion and virtue, mere prudence and self-interest would put them under considerable restraints, in relation to each: that whoever only doubts concerning them, admits they may be true; and therefore should take the acknowledged safer side: that any degree of persuasion, in favour of virtue only, much more of natural religion too, should excite a proportionably serious regard to it: and that the lowest apprehension of the truth of christianity, (which, I hope I proved to you, though briefly, hath the clearest marks of truth upon it) greatly strengthens every other tie; and farther binds men to inform themselves fully about it, as soon as possible; and give it respectful treatment in the mean time.

If then even these persons are to behave thus, how are we to behave? The doubter, nay the infidel, is obliged to no small care of his heart and life: what is the believer obliged to? We pride ourselves on being such: pity or detest those who are not: and yet, all the while, christians who think and act otherwise than christians ought, may deserve full as ill, perhaps much worse, then they: indeed may be one chief cause,

that they are what they are. Leaving others therefore to the Judge of all; let us at preſent think of ourſelves: conſider, what manner of perſons our holy profeſſion requires us to be; and whether we ſo obſerve its rules, that we may juſtly hope to attain its end: eſcape *the wrath to come**, and *partake of the glory that ſhall be revealed*†. Now it plainly requires,

1. That we be duly affected by the peculiar doctrines of chriſtianity. Many that profeſs it, and are perſuaded of its authority, ſeem to have no notion almoſt of its value, or of any great regard owing to it. They ſay, it is deſigned intirely to make men live good lives: and accordingly if they do but live what the world calls a good life, the deſign is anſwered. As for matters of mere faith, or even of practice beyond this, they conceive there is little need of being concerned about them: and thus they are very good chriſtians in their own opinions, with ſcarce any thing to diſtinguiſh them from good, or perhaps even from indifferent, heathens. In this error, the artful enemies of the goſpel ſtudiouſly confirm its inconſiderate friends. For thus, pretending by no means to oppoſe it, but only to rectify mens notions about it; and making loud complaints, if they are ſuſpected of any thing worſe; they can deſtroy, where they gain credit, the whole effect of what it adds to the religion of nature: and induce the unwary to imagine, there is nothing in it worth contending for, beſides *thoſe practical, ſocial, and real duties*, as they are pleaſed, by way of diſtinction, to call them, *which our reaſon and ſenſes preſcribe in common to us all*; and which therefore we learn and obſerve as well, without as with the bible; where they lie mixed with many other things, uſeleſs, if not hurtful; and are either miſrepreſented by the writers themſelves, or very liable to be miſtaken by us. But indeed, if the very writers of ſcripture, with the ſpirit of God to aſſiſt them, miſunderſtood the doctrines of revelation; he both choſe and guided them extremely ill; nor have we any poſſible means of underſtanding thoſe doctrines now. And if either they or we underſtand them at all; our Maker expects from us the belief of many things undiſcoverable by reaſon, as points of great conſequence to our eternal well-being; as with good cauſe he may. The knowledge of our fallen eſtate ſhows us our original deſtination, and our preſent need of help from above. The incarnation

* Matth iii. 7. Luke iii. 7. † 1 Pet. v. 1.

tion and death of God's eternal Son could not be appointed by him for purpoſes of ſmall importance: and his word acquaints us, that bleſſings of the higheſt importance depend on what he hath done and ſuffered for us; on his atonement and mediation, our title to pardon of ſin; on the grace of the Holy Ghoſt whom he ſent, our ability of performing acceptable obedience; on both, our reſurrection to eternal life; on our belief of theſe things, our intereſt in them. If then the goſpel be true, its peculiar doctrines are of the utmoſt moment: and the duties grounded on them, which we owe to God, as the Father of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt; to his Son, as our Redeemer; to his bleſſed Spirit, as our ſanctifier; are both as real, and as weighty, as any poſſible can be; fully equal in their obligation, and ſuperior in their rank, to the moſt valuable ones of human ſociety. They therefore who neglect them, lead very wicked, inſtead of good lives: and they who eſteem them lowly, diſhonour the author of them. It is true, reaſon cannot prove them: but it doth not contradict them. They are taught in ſcripture only: but they are taught there by the all-wiſe God; and he cannot have left us at liberty to model his revelations according to our own fancies; admit part, and reject part: but we are to take the whole plan of our ſalvation, as he hath delivered it: believe it though implicitly; and reſpect it, in proportion to the ſtreſs laid upon it by him, who muſt know. This will naturally diſpoſe us,

2. To perform the next obligation incumbent on us: paying a due regard to the peculiar inſtitutions of chriſtianity. Great numbers appear to have ſomehow perſuaded themſelves, that ſeveral things, which they muſt acknowledge their Maker hath appointed, as the ordinary means of heavenly grace and ſpiritual improvement, may notwithſtanding, nearly, if not quite, as well, be let alone. Baptiſm indeed they do practiſe: but with plain marks of conſidering it, as a mere empty ceremony; not, as our Saviour hath declared it*, the expreſs and original condition of our claim to all the mercies of the goſpel-covenant. Laying on of hands in confirmation, after proper inſtruction and a perſonal engagement to live piouſly and virtuouſly, though evidently a very affecting and uſeful rite, and reckoned, in the epiſtle to the *Hebrews*, amongſt *the principles of the doctrine of Chriſt*†; is yet deſired, in proportion,

* Mark xvi. 16. John iii. 5. † Heb. vi. 1, 2.

but by few. Receiving the Holy Euchariſt, though a duty of all chriſtians, enjoined by our Bleſſed Redeemer, almoſt with his dying words, and declared by St. *Paul* to be *the communion of his body and blood**, that is, a participation of the benefits of his death; is yet, I fear, entirely omitted by moſt, practiſed by many of the reſt, very ſeldom; and by ſome from very improper motives: and ſuch reaſons are pleaded for the neglect, as have either no weight at all, or equal weight againſt the hope of future happineſs. Praying to God is a dictate of natural, as well as revealed religion. And yet were a great part of you here preſent queſtioned, how conſtantly you pray in private, indeed when you prayed laſt, and whether you are careful to do it with attention and ſerioufneſs, or look on it only as a matter of courſe; what anſwer muſt you give? And as for publick worſhip: how many are there, who yet call themſelves Chriſtians, that hardly ever attend it? And how do many others think and ſpeak of it? Perhaps as matter of curioſity and amuſement. If they can hope for an entertaining diſcourſe after it, they will condeſcend to come and do homage to him, that made them, or ſeem to do it: otherwiſe they will not. Or perhaps they vouchſafe to attend it as matter of decent example and propriety. Accordingly, in ſome places they always go to church; in others, never: forgetting, that the latter will be known, and will influence, full as much as the former. Or the leaſt trifle in the world ſhall determine them, ſometimes the one way, ſometimes the other. And both doing and omitting it they talk of, in an eaſy, gay manner, as a thing of no conſequence at all. Nay, too often, it is directly pleaded, that they can ſpend their time as well, or much better, another way: for they know beforehand every thing that is told them here. Now, not to enquire particularly, in what better things, that they could not find leiſure for elſe, thoſe perſons actually ſpend the time of divine ſervice, who tell us ſo frankly they can: poſſibly they may, ſome of them, a little over-rate their knowledge: at leaſt, they frequently ſeem to have great need of being reminded, if not taught: and had they none, another and higher duty, for which we meet, is prayer. But to this, and all other acts of devotion, they object, that true devotion is in the heart; and outward ſhow is nothing material. Why, ſo is true loyalty, true friendſhip, every

* 1 Cor. x. 16.

every true virtue. But are we therefore bound to give no external demonſtration of them? At that rate, what would they be worth, and how long would they laſt? God indeed doth not want ſuch demonſtrations: but we want them, to keep alive our ſenſe of duty to him: the world around us wants them, to ſpread a like ſenſe amongſt others; and, were the benefits of his inſtitutions much leſs evident than they are; ſtill they are his, and we may be ſure he hath reaſon for them. A good ſubject will go beyond, rather than come ſhort of, what the laws require, in paying honour to his prince. A penitent criminal will not fail to ſue out and plead his pardon in due form, let forms, in themſelves, be things ever ſo inſignificant; if he did, purpoſely or negligently, he would well deſerve to forfeit it. Every man of common prudence, on whom or his family, any thing valuable is beſtowed on certain conditions, will think it of conſequence, to qualify himſelf, or them, according to thoſe conditions, whether he ſees the particular uſe of them or not. If then we think ſuch behaviour neceſſary in all temporal concerns, why not in ſpiritual? God is our king, and hath preſcribed to us the manner of doing him homage. He is our judge, and hath directed us to the method of eſcaping puniſhment. He is our gracious benefactor, and hath notified to us the means of obtaining his favours. Why ſhall any one thing, thus ordered by him, and therefore undoubtedly ordered in wiſdom, be either omitted, or obſerved with contempt? Surely this is by no means the ſpirit, with which ſinners ought to receive a tender of forgiveneſs; and mortals, of eternal life. The epiſtle to the *Hebrews* directs the firſt chriſtians, even in the midſt of perſecution, *not to forſake the aſſembling of themſelves together*, which comprehends every public office of religion; and laments, that *the manner of ſome was* to do otherwiſe*. How guilty then muſt they be, who are now of this number; or put on the appearance of deſpiſing the ordinances of Chriſt, at the ſame time that they uſe them; and, though really, to ſome degree, ſerious in them, are afraid of being thought ſo! But this leads me,

3. To a farther obligation we are under, which is to profeſs our regard, both for the doctrines and the inſtitutions of the goſpel, openly and boldly, on all fit occaſions. It is a reproach, I believe, peculiar to the chriſtians of this age and nation, that many

* Heb. x. 25.

many of them ſeem aſhamed of their chriſtianity: would not perhaps be ſaid to have thrown it aſide, yet would by no means be imagined much in earneſt about it: and therefore ſtudy, if poſſible, to conceal their way of thinking: or, when they are attacked upon it, excuſe their piety, as others do their vices, with a ſort of laughing half deference; and ſhift off the ſubject, as well and as ſoon as they can. A moſt aſtoniſhing treatment of what our eternal happineſs depends on: eſpecially when our Saviour expreſsly requires us to *confeſs him before men*, as ever we expect, that he ſhould *confeſs us before his Father, which is in heaven**. It is not meant that we ſhould be affectedly forward in talking of our religion; but whenever we are called to do ſo, unaffectedly own it, and ſtand by it. In ſuch a caſe, diſſimulation, or even reſerve, is a mean-ſpirited deſertion of the worthieſt cauſe in the world: and the words of the holy Jeſus on another occaſion are juſtly applicable to this, that *he, who is not for him, is againſt him*†. Whoever is unwilling to be taken for a pious and good man, runs a great riſque of ſoon becoming a profane and bad one. Open profeſſion would have reſtrained him from doing wrong, and others from tempting him: whereas a timorous concealment expoſes him both ways. At leaſt, it gives the irreligious a pretence for ſaying and imagining, either that every one thinks as they do, or that no one can defend thinking otherwiſe: and deprives thoſe, who are better diſpoſed, of a very animating and needful ſupport. For no inticement to neglect our duty is ſo dangerous, as the appearance of general neglect: nor any perſecution ſo effectual, as that of public ſcorn. Therefore we ſhould combine to ſhelter one another from it: declare frankly and with ſpirit, in our private converſation, as well as by our attendance here, what ſide we are of: not be afraid of a little, perhaps only ſeeming, contempt from thoſe, who are the juſteſt objects of pity themſelves; but be willing to *ſuffer* the *affliction of* ſhame, amongſt others, if it muſt be ſo, *with the people of God*‡: the number of whom is not yet become ſo ſmall, or ſo deſtitute of able advocates, but that, would they unite for that end, they might abundantly keep each other in countenance, and their adverſaries in awe. We have every poſſible reaſon to be zealous in our cauſe. Unbelievers have no ſingle good one to be ſo in theirs. Yet they are active, and we are remiſs: and what will

* Matth. x. 32. † Matth. xii 30. Luke xi. 23.
‡ Heb. xi. 25.

will this end in, unleſs we change our conduct? But then if we do, there is a

4th, Moſt important obligation incumbent on us, that of tempering our zeal with mildneſs and charity. We ought indeed to *contend earneſtly for the faith**, whenever it is oppoſed: but in a manner worthy of it. Cruel actions, opprobrious words, inward ill will, unjuſt bad opinion, are abſolutely forbidden us, even towards the enemies of the goſpel: and upon the whole, we do treat them with a moderation, which they are far from imitating. But ſtill more gentle ſhould we be to ſuch, as believe chriſtianity, but only miſunderſtand it: eſpecially conſidering, that we are juſt as liable to miſtake, as they. And it is a melancholy conſideration, that whilſt one part of thoſe, who profeſs our religion, are ſo cool about its general and eſſential intereſts; moſt of the other are ſo immoderately warm about their own particular ſyſtems and perſuaſions. Not only the maintainers of eſtabliſhed opinions are apt to judge hardly of the rigid oppoſers of them, and they, to return it: but many, of greater latitude, cry out for liberty to themſelves, though they enjoy it to the full, with a ſpirit of perſecution: and whilſt they claim an unbounded allowance for every new notion, will give none to thoſe, who retain the old; but throw imputations or contempt upon them, without equity or mercy. What can be the conſequence of this, but what we experience: that the bitter things which we ſay of one another, unbelievers, with ſeemingly good reaſon, will ſay after us: and when we have taught them to condemn the ſeveral ſorts of chriſtians, and eſpecially their teachers, as the worſt of men, will, by a very plauſible inference, condemn chriſtianity, as the worſt of religions? How zealouſly ſoever therefore contending parties may *hold faſt* what they profeſs; yet, violating the moſt indiſputable duties by their vehemence for diſputable doctrines, they provoke great numbers to ſit looſe to all profeſſion; and do incredible harm to the religion, which they would ſerve. For, let us try what methods we will, nothing can ever ſo effectually promote true faith, as joining to practiſe true charity. But however unanimous chriſtians may be in other reſpects, they will neither do honour to the goſpel, nor receive benefit from it, unleſs they are alſo careful,

5. To

* Jude 3.

5. To be ſeriouſly and uniformly pious and virtuous. Yet, moſt unhappily, whatever elſe we differ in, we agree but too well in neglecting this. Multitudes call themſelves chriſtians, who ſeem never to have thought of any care of their conduct; but make a ſolemn profeſſion of the pureſt and holieſt religion, that ever was; and at the ſame time, throughout their live, do every thing that they are inclined to, and nothing elſe. Others that will obſerve ſome reſtraints, would find, upon a fair examination, that they follow their paſſions, perhaps in as many or more caſes, than their principles; or, which comes to the ſame thing, accommodate their principles to ſuit their paſſions. And even they, who have little of any bad inclination to lead them wrong, are very frequently led almoſt as wrong by indolent compliance with bad cuſtom. For from whence is it, that the generality of men form their rule of behaviour? Not from ſcripture, or from reaſon: but from faſhion and common practice: whatever they find people of tolerable reputation do, that they do likewiſe. When a farther ſtep of wrong indulgence is publicly taken, they proceed to take the ſame; or, it may be, one ſomewhat leſs: the duties, which others throw off intirely, they practiſe rarely, and with indifference: the liberties, which others indulge without reſerve, they approach towards with heſitation and by degrees; but as the world goes on from bad to worſe, they go on too; and imagine they are perfectly ſafe, becauſe they are a little behind. Now men ſhould not indeed be ſuperſtitiouſly ſcrupulous: but they ſhould be conſcientiouſly attentive to their hearts and lives; and reflect what ought to be done, as well as obſerve what is done. The goſpel forbids, inſtead of recommending, *conformity to the world**; by no means with an intention, that we ſhould be ſingular in matters of indifference, but reſolute againſt compliances unlawful or dangerous. Chriſtians, far from being permitted to follow others into ſin, are deſigned to lead them into piety and virtue: to be *the light, the ſalt of the earth*†: not to ſet an example of uſeleſs rigour, much leſs of uncharitable cenſorioufneſs; but of punctual and impartial adherence to every rule, which God hath appointed by reaſon or ſcripture, and faithful endeavours to attain the great end of his appointments: for without that, the exacteſt outward regularity is empty form. *Now the end of the commandment is charity,*

* Rom. xii. 2. † Matth. v. 13, 14.

*ty, out of a pure heart and of a good conſcience, and of faith unfeigned**: a ſincere ſpirit of love and reverence towards our Maker, our Redeemer and Sanctifier; of juſtice and goodneſs to our fellow-creatures, of reaſonableneſs and moderation, with reſpect to the advantages and enjoyments of the preſent life; for in theſe things conſiſts our fitneſs for a better. This then is the real temper of chriſtianity. And if we have either never felt it, or perceive ourſelves declining and deviating from it; our hearts growing fond of worldly objects, and ſinking down into that ſupine diſregard to God and our duty, and a judgement to come, which is undeniably the prevailing, and likely to be the fatal, diſtemper of the preſent age: our caſe and our remedy are plainly laid down in that awful exhortation to the church of *Sardis: I know thy works; that thou haſt a name that thou liveſt, and art dead. Be watchful; and ſtrengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.—Remember, how thou haſt received and heard; and hold faſt, and repent. If thou ſhalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief: and thou ſhalt not know what hour I will come upon thee*†. But then to do this effectually, we muſt obey the whole injunction of the text: and not only *hold faſt that which is* evidently *good*, but,

6. and laſtly, *Abſtain from all appearance of evil.* It might be tranſlated, from every kind of evil. But even then, the ſenſe would be much the ſame. For though doing what we know to be wrong is a groſſer kind of wickedneſs: yet doing what appears to us wrong, though we are not ſure of it, is a real kind: and, even were we abſolutely doubtful, ſtill, if taking one courſe may be acting amiſs, and taking the contrary cannot; the general rule certainly is, to lean always towards the ſecurer ſide: for why ſhould we run into danger needleſsly? And yet what numbers of miſerable creatures are there, whom the obſervance of this one direction would have made happy: who ſaw the ſafe path, but would prefer the pleaſing one; exulted in it for a while, then were enſnared of a ſudden, and loſt perhaps for ever! Nor is it pleaſure only, but intereſt, power, vanity, reſentment, every thing within us and around us, in its turn, that may endanger our innocence, by tempting us to venture upon what we hope, but are not ſatisfied, is lawful. *Go not* therefore *in a way, wherein thou may-*

* 1 Tim. i. 5. † Rev. iii. 1, 2, 3.

*eſt fall: be not confident in a plain way**. Even ſuch actions, as appear to us very allowable, yet, if they appear evil to others, it is, ordinarily ſpeaking, both our prudence and our duty to abſtain from, as much as, with tolerable convenience, we can. Whatever indeed, on mature conſideration, we are fully perſuaded we ought to do, that we muſt do, let the world think as it will. But where we apprehend a thing to be only permitted: if the wife will diſapprove it, or the injudicious miſinterpret it; if the good will be afflicted, or the bad rejoice at it; if rigid and warm tempers will be guilty of cenſuring us for it raſhly; or eaſy and complying ones follow us in it, againſt their judgements; if our taking harmleſs liberties will encourage others to take ſinful ones: in ſhort, if any how, by doing what otherwiſe we might, we ſhall induce any one elſe to do what he ought not: the great law of chriſtian charity requires, *that no man put a ſtumbling-block, or occaſion to fall, in his brother's way*; or do any thing, whereby he *is grieved, or offended, or made weak*†. Showing this tender care neither to intice nor provoke a ſingle perſon, if it can be avoided, into ſin of whatever ſort, but to *pleaſe our neighbour for his good, to edification*‡, is a precept, I believe, peculiar to the goſpel: or at leaſt, hath ſo peculiar a ſtreſs laid on it there, as to diſtinguiſh our religion, greatly to its honour, from every other inſtitution of life, that the world hath known.

After ſuch an addition to all the reſt, there cannot be a completer proviſion imagined, by rules of behaviour, for the virtue, the peace, the eternal felicity of mankind. And therefore nothing remains, but what muſt depend on ourſelves; that, having the beſt and fulleſt directions, the nobleſt promiſes, the moſt gracious helps, we think ſeriouſly, while it is time, what uſe we ought to make, and what we do make, of theſe advantages. The word of God will ſhow us the firſt: our own conſciences, if honeſtly conſulted, will tell us the latter. Happy are they in the higheſt degree, who can ſtand the compariſon of the two: and happy they, in the next place, whom a deep ſenſe, that at preſent they cannot, excites effectually to earneſt ſupplications, and faithful endeavours, that they ſoon may. I conclude therefore with the words following my text. *The very God of Peace ſanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole ſpirit, and ſoul and body, be preſerved blameleſs unto the coming of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt*§.

S. F. R.

* Eccluſ. xxxii. 20, 21.
† Rom. xiv. 13, 15, 21.
‡ Rom. xv. 2.
§ 1 Theſſ. v. 23.

SERMON XLVI.

The Meanness and Falseness of the Common Excuses for Irreligion and Immorality.

Luke xii. 57.

Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?

THE duties, which God hath enjoined us, though reasonable and beneficial in the highest degree, are yet, through the depravity of human nature, and the prevalence of bad customs, become so unacceptable, that they are practised, as we must be sensible, but imperfectly by the best, and very little by the largest part of the world. Yet avowedly to neglect doing what they ought, is too shocking a behaviour to sit easy upon the minds of men. Some plea therefore they must find out, either to justify, or at least to excuse, their manner of life. And various are, and ever have been, the excuses, invented by the irreligious and immoral, not only to maintain some character amongst others, but chiefly to quiet themselves.

Now of all these, one of the best, if it were a true one, would be that of ignorance: not knowing that such and such things are incumbent on us. This appears to be a case, to which not only compassion must have regard, but which even justice itself must acquit of guilt. And therefore it is no wonder, if many shelter themselves under so favourable a pretence.

The lower part of mankind, in general, on almost every occasion, alledge, that they have not the advantages of education and instruction which others have: that they are not able, perhaps even to read that holy book, in which their duty is set forth: and if they be, yet the same quickness to understand it, or leisure to study it, cannot be looked for from them, as if their minds had been improved by rules of reasoning and

judging, and their time at their own diſpoſal. A great deal they think may be required, with the utmoſt reaſon, from thoſe of higher rank: but from ſuch as they are, little or nothing.

But, beſides this vulgar ſort, there is alſo a learned kind of ignorance, pleaded by ſome, whoſe freedom of inquiry and ſuperior ſagacity hath given them cauſe, they apprehend, to be very diffident of many points, that others are firmly perſuaded of. And therefore they argue, that though it may be the duty of common people, who, for want of the means of knowledge or of abilities to uſe them, muſt believe what they are taught; though it may be right and neceſſary for them, in conſequence of their belief, to practiſe virtue and piety very conſcientiouſly: yet it muſt not be expected, that thoſe of greater genius, who are more enlightened, and perceive many doubts in theſe matters, ſhould put themſelves under diſagreeable reſtraints, merely on account of uncertain ſpeculations; and conform their lives to the rigid precepts of chriſtianity, when they are really not well ſatisfied of the authority of it; nor, it may be, even of natural religion.

Thus, you ſee, the loweſt incapacity and the higheſt ſelf-opinion can urge in effect the ſame argument, to evade what men have no mind to. And I ſhall now ſhow, that in both it is inconcluſive: and fully confuted by our Saviour's home queſtion, *Yea, and why even of yourſelves judge ye not what is right?*

Theſe words appear, by the parallel places in the other Evangeliſts, to have been originally deſigned againſt thoſe amongſt the *Jews*, who, from diſlike of the ſtrictneſs of our bleſſed Lord's morality, pretended ignorance of his divine miſſion, after he had given abundant proofs of it; when yet, without any ſeparate proofs of it at all, the main things which he taught, carried their own evidence along with them, and every man's heart bore witneſs to their truth. They had ſeen miracles of various kinds, performed in atteſtation of his claim: yet ſtill they were not content without more, and thoſe of their own chuſing. *The Phariſees came forth, with the Sadducees alſo, tempting him, and ſought of him a ſign from heaven**. But he, with no leſs dignity than prudence, refuſed to gratify a curioſity, both ill-meaning and endleſs: and *ſighing deeply*

* Matth. xvi. 1. Mark. viii. 11.

deeply in his ſpirit, as St *Mark* informs us*, at this perverſe diſpoſition of theirs; told them, with a kind, becauſe needful, ſeverity of ſpeech, where the defect lay. *A wicked and adulterous generation ſeeketh after a ſign*†: your ſinful inclinations and lives, not the want or the deſire of ſufficient evidence, prompt you to this demand: and *verily I ſay unto you, there ſhall be no ſign given*, no ſuch viſible manifeſtation of divine glory as you inſolently require, vouchſafed *to this generation*‡: nor is it requiſite. *When ye ſee a cloud riſe out of the weſt, ſtraitway ye ſay, there cometh a ſhower, and ſo it is. And when ye ſee the ſouth wind blow, ye ſay there will be heat, and it cometh to paſs. Ye hypocrites, ye can diſcern the face of the ſky and of the earth: but how is it that ye do not diſcern this time*§? That is: on other occaſions you appear very able to judge of things by the proper indications of them. How can you then, with any colour of ſincerity, pretend, that amidſt ſo many prophecies fulfilled, and ſo many miracles performed, you have not, after all, ſufficient conviction, that this is the ſeaſon when the Meſſiah ſhould appear, and that I am he? Nay, as to the principal part of my doctrine, which is the real cauſe of your antipathy to the whole; as to the great precepts of pure religion and uniform virtue, and your need of repentance and faith in God's mercy; what occaſion is there for any farther demonſtrations of them, than your own hearts, if honeſtly conſulted, will not fail to afford? *Yea, and why even of yourſelves judge ye not what is right?*

Now this method of reaſoning is equally applicable to unbelievers and cavillers in all ages. It is in vain for them, to invent new difficulties, or magnify old ones, concerning the authority of our religion; while the reaſon of things, the truth of facts, and the nature of God and man continue to exhibit ſo full proof of thoſe fundamental articles of it, the eternal obligation of moral duties, the ſinfulneſs of every one's nature and life, the neceſſity of repentance, and humble application for pardon and grace. And, ſince the true quarrel of ſuch perſons is againſt theſe doctrines, and theſe cannot be ſhaken; they had much better reconcile themſelves to the whole, than make fruitleſs attacks upon one part; in which if they were to ſucceed, (as they never will) they would, in point of argument,

* Verſe 12. Matth. xvi. 4.
‡ Mark viii. 12. § Luke xii. 54, 55, 56.

ment, be almoſt as far from their favourite ſcheme, of liberty to do what they pleaſe, and think highly of themſelves notwithſtanding, as they were before. Suppoſe there are ſome doctrines againſt which they can find more objections, than their neighbours: there are ſurely others, of which they can diſcern more clearly the certain grounds. If not, they have employed their imagined ſuperior faculties to very ill purpoſe. Or, were they to doubt of ever ſo many points; yet, if they take pains for it, and force themſelves to doubt, hunting every way for difficulties, aſking for no ſolutions, and turning a deaf ear to them when offered; they have no more excuſe for any part of their conſequent wrong behaviour, than if they had no doubts at all. For the whole of their caſe is: they perplex things on purpoſe, in order to complain that they are not clear: walk with their eyes wilfully ſhut, and then inſiſt, that they cannot be blamed, if they ſtumble; for it is quite dark, and they do not ſee a ſtep of their way.

But let us now proceed to thoſe, who acknowledge themſelves, as many of the former would, if they had more modeſty, the leſs knowing part of mankind. Some of theſe profeſs a ſecond-hand ſort of ſcepticiſm: built not ſo much on their own judgement, as that of their admired leaders juſt mentioned. But ſince the maſters are indefenſible, their implicit diſciples muſt be yet more ſo For, if the queſtion is to be decided by the authority of men of letters and abilities, the greateſt number and moſt eminent, beyond all compariſon, have confeſſedly been always on the ſide of religion: even excluding the clergy, as intereſted in the caſe: which, however, is by no means thought a ſufficient reaſon, in other profeſſions, why men of known ſkill and probity ſhould be diſregarded, in what they unanimouſly affirm, after careful examination.

But the generality of the unlearned confeſs the obligation of chriſtianity moſt readily; yet daily tranſgreſs its laws: and, when they are charged with their fault, plead ignorance, as we have ſeen, amongſt other things, eſpecially the lower part of them, to excuſe their diſobedience to the cleareſt revelation of God's will, that the world ever knew; and whoſe early diſtinction it was that *the poor had the goſpel preached to them**. Why then may we not ſay to ſuch, as our Saviour ſaid to the Jews; *Ye hypocrites, ye can diſcern the face of the ſky*

* Matth. xi. 5.

ſky and of the earth! You can judge in all the common affairs of life. You can attain to a competent ſkill, many times to great perfection, in your ſeveral employments, and trades: though attended with many difficulties, and requiring much application and dexterity. You can foreſee, at a diſtance, what will make for your worldly intereſt, or againſt it: you can lay ſchemes, full of cunning and long reach, for guarding againſt dangers, retrieving loſſes, ſecuring and improving advantages. What hinders you then from arriving at the knowledge of religion; which conſiſts in things much eaſier to be underſtood: love and reverence to God, juſtice and goodneſs to your fellow-creatures, reaſonable and virtuous government of yourſelves, humble recourſe to the divine mercy when you have done amiſs, and faithful uſe of the divine aſſiſtance to amend? If you have inſtructions in the management of buſineſs, and the wiſdom of this world: have you not inſtruction alſo in the precepts of a chriſtian life? One day in ſeven of your time, at leaſt, you are not only allowed, but enjoined, to ſpend principally in learning and thinking of your duty. The word of God is read to you, if you are not able to read it yourſelves: it is explained to you, if it be not already plain enough: and the moſt important parts are the plaineſt of all. The ſeveral articles of chriſtian faith and practice are taught you in your earlieſt childhood; and imprinted on your memory at the time, when impreſſions are moſt laſting. They are afterwards more diſtinctly propoſed to you from this place, week after week; and enforced on you by motives no leſs powerful, than the love of eternal happineſs and the dread of eternal miſery. There is no ſin you practiſe, no good action you omit, but you are publicly warned, at one time or another, of your fault, and the danger of it; and there is no doubt or ſcruple, that can diſquiet you, concerning any branch of your behaviour, but you may open your caſe often to your more learned and more prudent neighbours, always to the miniſters of God's word, and receive ſatisfaction about it. What poſſible room is there left then for pleading ignorance of your Lord and Maſter's will? This is a deſcription of the means of knowledge with which the loweſt and meaneſt among believers are provided. And even to theſe may be applied, though not in an equal degree, yet with great truth, what our Saviour declared to his immediate diſciples: *Verily I ſay unto you, that*

many

*many prophets and righteous men have deſired to ſee thoſe things ye ſee, and have not ſeen them; and to hear thoſe things that which we hear, and have not heard them: but bleſſed are your eyes, for they ſee; and your ears, for they hear**. Ignorant and knowing are comparative terms: and men uſually compare themſelves with thoſe that are next them only; and draw falſe concluſions from doing ſo. A chriſtian, of ſmaller opportunities for improvement than ſome of his fellow-chriſtians, thinks every thing ought to be forgiven him for that reaſon. And yet, in reality, not only the admired ſages of heathen antiquity, but the patriarchs that were favoured with communications from heaven, the prophets and penmen of ſcripture under the Jewiſh diſpenſation, nay the immediate fore-runner of our bleſſed Lord himſelf, who ſaw him and converſed with him on earth, had leſs means of acquaintance with the doctrines of religion, than the pooreſt diſciple of Chriſt now may have, if he will. *Verily I ſay unto you, among them that are born of woman, there hath not riſen a greater than John the Baptiſt; notwithſtanding, he that is leaſt in the kingdom of heaven*, in the goſpel-age, *is greater than he*†.

But it may be imagined perhaps, that the benefits of religious inſtruction are partially repreſented, and ſpoken of much too highly, by thoſe who are concerned in diſpenſing them. Why, be it ſo then. Let us lay aſide for a while the conſideration of what you learn here. Your Maker hath by no means truſted you intirely to our care: but hath appointed your parents, your friends, every ſerious perſon around you, for your inſtructors too: nay, to co-operate with all theſe, he hath placed a faithful witneſs and monitor of his truths in every breaſt; and therefore the want of outward helps can never juſtify tranſgreſſors. What *Moſes* ſaid in God's name to the Jews, is true in relation to all men: *The commandment which I command thee this day, not hidden from thee, neither is it far off; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayeſt do it*‡. And what *Iſaiah* ſaid of chriſtianity, holds in proportion of natural conſcience: *An high way ſhall be there; and it ſhall be called the way of holineſs; the way-faring men, though fools, ſhall not err therein*§. The duties

* Matth. xiii. 16. † Matth. xi. 11.
‡ Deut. xxx. 11, 14. § Iſ. xxx. 8.

duties of mankind are not ſo intricate and perplexed, but that a good heart, without a very ſagacious head, may eaſily find its way through them. For the confirmation of this, let us take a view of the fundamental parts of practical religion; thoſe which men are moſt apt to fail in; and ſee which of them all any one can fairly ſay he was ignorant of, or doubtful about, and had not the means of ſufficient light to direct his ſteps.

To begin with the belief and worſhip of almighty God. Is not every man capable of ſeeing, let him be ever ſo little acquainted with nature, that the heavens and the earth, the order of the ſeaſons, the returns of day and night, the whole frame of things in general, is full of uſe and beauty; and muſt be the work of amazing power, wiſdom and goodneſs? Doth not every man feel; that he is frail and dependent, that his life and being is not owing to himſelf, nor conſequently, that of his parents to them, and therefore they all proceed from a ſuperior cauſe? Doth not every man perceive, that he is *fearfully and wonderfully made** ; that the ſeveral parts of his compoſition are exactly fitted to the ſeveral purpoſes of life; the eye for ſeeing, the ear for hearing, each member for its reſpective end? And his inward inclinations and affections no leſs ſo, than his outward limbs? Muſt not every man be ſenſible, that the ſupports and conveniencies, which he enjoys, are not ſupplied him merely by his own care; but chiefly by the providence of another, *who maketh his ſun to riſe*†, his, *wind to blow*‡, *his rain to deſcend*, his earth to be fruitful? Hath not every man heard it owned, that the more diligently any one part of nature is examined, the fuller proofs it affords, that an almighty, allwiſe and gracious being, muſt be the author of the whole? And what he hath made, no doubt but he governs and ſuperintends. This is the plain obvious account of things, that one ſhould think muſt almoſt offer itſelf of courſe to every common mind, without any learning at all: and the deepeſt learning gives it the ſtrongeſt confirmation. Nor is it ſo much as pretended, that any account hath been attempted of the origin of the world, or any thing in it, different from what religion aſſigns, but it hath been either palpably falſe and abſurd, or impenetrably dark and unintelligible. It being then ſo clear, that there is a maker and preſerver of all,

* Pſ. cxxxix. 14. † Matth. v. 45. ‡ Pſ. cxlvii. 18.

infinitely powerful, wiſe and bounteous, what can be more viſible than our duty; to praiſe him for his mercies, pray to him for the continuance of them, place our happineſs in his favour, fear his diſpleaſure, and do his will? Surely the moſt ignorant among us, that think at all, cannot but find all this written in their hearts: nor can the accuteſt and moſt artful diſpute againſt it, without being ſelf-condemned. And what then hath any one to plead for himſelf, if he lives regardleſs of him, *in whom he lives, and moves, and hath his being**; without gratitude to his bounty, from whom all he hath, or can hope for, comes; without obedience to his commands, who requires nothing of us, but for our own good; without reſignation to his will, who is rightful Lord of the univerſe, and uſes boundleſs authority only to the purpoſe of infinite goodneſs? ſurely, as the apoſtle reaſons, ſince *the inviſible things of God, even his eternal power and Godhead, are clearly ſeen from the creation of the world, being underſtood by the things that are made; they are without excuſe, who, when they know God, glorify him not as God, neither are thankful*†.

Let us now proceed to the duties, which we owe to our fellow-creatures. The ſenſe of theſe, becauſe they are of more immediate importance to the good of ſociety, God hath imprinted with greater ſtrength on our minds, than even that of our obligations to himſelf. As it muſt be the will of him, who is ſo juſt and good to us all, that we ſhould be juſt and good to one another; and from this principle, as the root, every branch of right behaviour ſprings: ſo he hath planted in our hearts a natural love of equity, a natural feeling of kind affection; a natural conſcience, applauding us when we act according to theſe diſpoſitions, condemning us when we violate them: and ſeldom do we deſerve its reproaches, but either at the time, or ſoon after, we undergo them. Conſider but a little more particularly, what the mutual duties of men are: Honeſty and fairneſs in their dealings, truth in their words, friendlineſs in their demeanor, willingneſs to forgive offences, reſpectful obedience to ſuperiors, ready condeſcenſion to inferiors, tender love to near relations, pity and relief of the poor, diligent care to be ſerviceable to mankind in our proper ſtation. Which one of theſe obligations (and all the reſt are like them, can

* Acts xvii. 28. † Rom. i. 20, 21.

can any pretend he was ignorant of, or doubtful about? Who of us all hath ever done an unjuſt, a hard, an ill-natured, a paſſionate, an undutiful, an inſolent, action; or lived an idle, uſeleſs life; and can truly ſay, he was not ſenſible that he did amiſs? We all know, when others do amiſs in theſe reſpects: and therefore we are very capable of knowing, when we do ſo ourſelves. We may drown the voice of conſcience in turbulent paſſions and vehement purſuits of profit or pleaſure; we may coolly and deliberately refuſe to obey it: but it will ſpeak, and from time to time will be heard. And therefore it is not ignorance or doubt, but wickedneſs of heart and *holding the truth in unrighteouſneſs**, that makes us negligent of, and injurious to each other, ſo often as we are.

The third part of our duty is the government of ourſelves, according to the rules of ſobriety, temperance and chaſtity. Now who doth not know, that the obſervance of theſe virtues is right and fit: that the violation of them is prejudicial to the reaſon, the health, the reputation, the fortunes, the families of men, and introduces riot and madneſs, confuſion and miſery into the world? Who doth not ſee, that ſuperiority to the cravings of appetite, and ſcorn of irregular gratifications, is a worthy, an honourable character: and that exceſs, diſſoluteneſs and debauchery hath ſomething low and ſhameful in it: and ſtill more ſo, as, by habitual indulgence, men come to be leſs aſhamed of it? Can any one ſay, he did not know, that gluttony and drunkenneſs and promiſcuous lewdneſs were ſins: but thought them as conſiſtent with the obligations of a rational nature, the good order of ſociety, and the commands of his Maker, as moderation and ſelf-denial? And if no man is capable of miſtaking thus, why is not *the judgement of God according to truth, againſt them which commit ſuch things*† ?

But further yet: Doth not every man know in his conſcience, that, plain as his duties to God, his fellow-creatures and himſelf, are, he hath, more or leſs tranſgreſſed them all; that he hath a nature continually prone to tranſgreſſion; that therefore he needs both pardon for what is paſt, and aſſiſtance for the time to come; and that he can have neither, but through God's undeſerved mercy? Or, however ignorant men left to their own reaſon may be through careleſſneſs and wickedneſs, as they were indeed amazingly ignorant; or, whatever

 doubts

* Rom. i. 18. † Rom. ii. 2.

doubts they had, after ſinning, concerning their forgiveneſs and acceptance, as they could not help having great doubts: yet at leaſt muſt not every profeſſor of the goſpel be ſenſible, both what he is to do, and what he may promiſe himſelf on complying with the terms which it propoſes: and that theſe are, *repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jeſus Chriſt**, and humble uſe of the appointed means of grace: of attention to the reading and preaching of God's word, earneſt prayer, worthy participation of the holy ſacrament? And how can he then plead ingnorance hereafter, if he reſolves now to live according to his own fancy, and to ſtand or fall by his own merits: and haughtily deſpiſes, or indolently neglects, applying, as a penitent ſinner ought, to infinite goodneſs?

Upon the whole, ſince moſt of the main branches of our duty are thus obvious to our underſtandings of themſelves; and all of them are conſtantly taught us, by the holy ſcripture, by the laws of our country, by the opinion and conſent of the wiſeſt and beſt of mankind, by the inſtructions of perſons appointed for that purpoſe; what account do we imagine we ſhall poſſibly be able to give, why religion, ſo eaſily apprehended, is ſo little practiſed by us? If any do not know what is commanded; it muſt be, becauſe they avoided knowing it: if any doubt of the reality of the command; the reaſon is, that they deſire to doubt: and how can we flatter ourſelves, that any thing is excuſable, which proceeds from a diſpoſition of mind ſo groſsly and wilfully wrong? ſuppoſe a ſervant of ours had purpoſely kept out of the way of receiving our orders, or invented perplexities and cavils about the meaning of them, or the certainty of our having delivered them, becauſe he had no mind to obey them: would that juſtify him? Should we not immediately tell him, that what he eaſily might and clearly ought to have known and underſtood, he was inexcuſable, if he would not know and underſtand? And what muſt we think of our great maſter in heaven, if we try to impoſe on him with devices and tricks, that will not paſs amongſt ourſelves?

But in reality men have not this excuſe, if it were one. They do know, how they ought to behave; they do know that they ought *to live ſoberly, righteouſly and godly, in this world, looking for*† the recompences of another: and they well

* Acts xx. 21. † Tit ii. 12, 13.

well know in the main, what particulars this obligation comprehends; how grievouſly they have fallen ſhort of them, and what need they have to repent and humbly beg forgiveneſs and ſtrength, through him who hath procured us a title to both. Nor can they pretend, that theſe are trifling matters: the happineſs even of this life depends on them; or, if it did not, the all-ſeeing God hath enjoined them, as the conditions and the means of happineſs in the next; the judge of the whole earth will inquire ſtrictly at the great day into our performance of them; and there can be no good account given him, why a pain duty was omitted or tranſgreſſed. We can eaſily deceive ourſelves: we can make ſpecious pleas one to another for our failings; which the occaſion that we have for allowances in our turn, incline us often to look upon very favourably in our neighbours. But, in the ſight of God, ſuppoſing a thing incumbent on us, and ſuppoſing it eaſily known to be ſo; what can be ſaid to the purpoſe, why we did not perform it? "We were poor and ignorant." But we were not, or we needed not to have been, ignorant in this particular. "We were ſuſpicious and doubtful." But our doubts were affected, not real; or partial, not honeſt and upright. Or if we doubted ever ſo fairly about ſome things; why did not we do thoſe, of which we could not doubt? And even for the reſt, why did we not take care, that our practice ſhould be on the undoubtedly ſafer, that is, the virtuous and religious, ſide? But we had ſtrong inclinations, that prompted us to the courſe we took. No wonder: here was the trial of our virtue: it was our buſineſs to have reſiſted them. "But human virtue is not ſufficient:" Therefore we ſhould have applied earneſtly for divine grace. "But we were ſurpriſed into wrong behaviour." It was our buſineſs to be watchful; and at leaſt a habit and a life of ſin cannot happen by ſurpriſe. In ſhort, let us multiply pretences as long as we pleaſe, the very nature of duty implies, that it ought to be done.

Still there are ſome, eſpecially in ſome circumſtances, who are to a much greater degree excuſable for the ſins they are guilty of, than others. But yet all excuſe is not a juſtification: and will leaſt of all prove ſuch to thoſe, who, inſtead of endeavouring to act right, ſet themſelves to contrive reaſons, why their acting wrong ſhould be diſpenſed with. It is true, the very beſt have their faults: and faults not indulged ſhall

be

be forgiven us, if we are truly ſorry for them, and earneſtly apply to God's mercy through Chriſt for pardon, and carefully watch againſt the return of them. But when men firſt allow themſelves to ſin, then ſtand on their own defence; and particularly, if they plead ignorance or doubtfulneſs of what they have ſuch abundant means of knowing and being ſure of: they muſt not hope, that this conduct, if they perſevere in it, can eſcape final condemnation.

It ought however to be acknowledged after all, that many have comparatively but low abilities, and ſmall opportunities for knowledge: and that to ſome, whoſe underſtandings are not weak, but perverſely turned, greater opportunities are of ſmall uſe; for what enlightens others, only dazzles them. And accordingly our Saviour moſt equitably conſiders theſe diſadvantages; and acquaints us, ten verſes before the text, that *the ſervant, which knew his Lord's will, and prepared not himſelf, neither did according to his will, ſhall be beaten with many ſtripes: but he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of ſtripes, ſhall be beaten with few ſtripes**. But theſe words, though full of terror to the great, the learned and the wiſe, if they neglect their duty; by no means carry in them that encouragement to the poor, the illiterate and ſlow of apprehenſion, which poſſibly they may ſeem to do. For they chiefly relate, not to ſuch times as ours; but that in which they were ſpoken: when the Jews had great light, and therefore great guilt if they ſinned; but the Gentiles were, and had been long, in profound darkneſs: *the time of which ignorance God* is repreſented, as in compariſon *winking at*; but *now*, in the goſpel age, he *commands*, under ſeverer penalties, *all men every where to repent*; becauſe he hath given them a clearer knowledge of his pleaſure, and a fuller *aſſurance* of his *judging the world in righteouſneſs*†. And yet it muſt be obſerved, our Saviour did not apprehend any one to have been ſo ignorant, even then, of his maſter's will, as to eſcape being puniſhed for tranſgreſſing it; but declares, that he who knew the leaſt of it; *he who*, compared with others, *knew it not*; knew enough however to deſerve being *beaten with ſtripes*; though fewer, than they ſhould undergo, who, with ſtronger conviction and diſtincter perceptions of their duty, were equally tranſgreſſors of it. And how ſevere even the mildeſt puniſhments

* Luke xii. 47, 48. † Acts xvii. 30, 31.

puniſhments of a wicked life may be, God forbid we ſhould any of us try. For whoever ſins wilfully in hopes of ſuffering but little hereafter; for that very reaſon will be made to ſuffer a great deal.

The concluſion of the whole matter is, that we have reaſon all to apply to ourſelves the prophet's words: *He hath ſhewn thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord thy God requireth of thee**. And though it ſtill be true, that ſome ages of the world have been dark, and others blinded with falſe lights; that ſome men naturally ſee little, and others are ſtrangely given to ſee wrong: yet, in general, the duties of life are level to the capacities of all men: and eſpecially among chriſtians, but above all, chriſtians ſo peculiarly bleſſed with the means of inſtruction, as we of this nation are, no one can poſſibly, without either deliberate obſtinacy, or intolerable negligence, continue unacquainted with what he is bound to do: or the recompence he is to expect, if he do it not. *For this is the condemnation; that light is come into the world, and men have loved darkneſs rather than light, becauſe their deeds were evil*†.

* Micah vi 8. † John iii. 19.

SER-

SERMON XLVII.

The Folly and Misery of Sensual Indulgences.

2 Tim. iii. 4.

——*Lovers of pleaſures, more than lovers of God.*

THE wiſe and gracious ruler of the world hath created us to obey him, and from that obedience to receive our proper ſhare of happineſs. He hath adapted a variety of ſatisfactions to the various parts of our frame: and taught us by nature, but more diſtinctly by his word, the due ſubordinations of each; and the circumſtances, in which we may or may not lawfully partake of them. Some of theſe are capable of being exactly ſpecified: and in ſuch we cannot trangreſs, without either acknowledging our guilt, or daring to deny the authority of the law. Many take the humbler method of the two; and yet grow little, if at all, better: many the bolder, and grow continually worſe. Both are frequently admoniſhed, and may be left at preſent to their own reflections. But other caſes admit only a general and leſs accurate deſcription; which leaves room for thoſe, who deſire it, to go very improper lengths, and ſtill imagine they are within bounds. Thus, in eating and drinking; to uſe the good creatures of God with delight is certainly allowable: and therefore too many ſet their minds to a ſtrange degree on the practice and the ſtudy of this meaneſt of gratifications; and think they may load and inflame themſelves without ſcruple, provided they ſtop but at all ſhort of ſhocking intemperance. Thus again what we commonly call amuſements are in their nature innocent. God hath formed us for pleaſing intercouſe, and put mirth in our hearts with intent that we ſhould exert it. The ſprightly diſpoſition of youth calls for gladſome activity: the fatigues of buſineſs,

buſineſs, the infirmities of old age, the weariſomneſs of ill health and low ſpirits, often require the beſt relief, that chearfulneſs can miniſter. And not to allow that our Maker conſiders *whereof we are made**, would be giving an idea of religion both unamiable and falſe. But then, juſt how far each of us may lawfully carry our indulgence, cannot be minutely pointed out. And therefore, inſtead of being contented to ſpeak and think mildly of others, which would be a right uſe of this uncertainty; we are apt to be negligent of reſtraining ourſelves; which is a very wrong one. For there are numberleſs things, in which limits cannot be fixed preciſely, and yet conſiderable exceſſes are deſtructive. Now in all theſe, our ignorance ought to teach us a reaſonable, though not ſcrupulous, caution: but eſpecially in matters of gay entertainment; becauſe the preſent age hath confeſſedly a peculiar turn that way. Whether the preceding ones had not other faults as bad is out of the queſtion: our concern is to watch againſt our own: for which purpoſe the text affords us a moſt equitable and comprehenſive and trying direction; that we are not to *love pleaſures more than God:* meaning, than our duty to him. For, *this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments*†. Now he hath enjoined us very important duties: of improving ourſelves in every thing worthy, and being ſerviceable to our fellow-creatures. What influence then upon theſe will our amuſements, as we conduct them, have?

The more ſteadily we apply, without impairing our healths or faculties by it, to affairs of real uſe, the properer part we act in life. Do then indeed our ſerious occupations wear us down ſo, that we need all the time, which we take, to recruit ourſelves? Or do we only, when we are tired of one trifle, run to another? Is it matter of humiliation to us, that we are obliged to ſpend ſo much of every day inſignificantly: or do we take a pride in ſpending it thus; lead as many into the ſame way as we can, and throw contempt on thoſe, whom we cannot? Have we impartially examined, what obligations, public and private, are incumbent on us: whether we are chiefly attentive to theſe, omitting none; or to what other things, and what the benefit of them is: whether it be any other, than keeping ourſelves in humour, like froward children? We ſhould do well to ſtate the diſpoſal of our time: firſt ſet

* Pſ. ciii. 14. † 1 John v. 3.

down, how much we employ in each of our concerns of moment; then how much goes in diverſions of one kind or another, in preparing for them, in refreſhment after them, in needleſs company at home and abroad; and, if the diſproportion be great, think beforehand, how wretched a void and blank, at beſt, our lives will appear at the cloſe of them to have been, ſhould the remainder of them be waſted in the ſame manner.

We all wiſh to be diſtinguiſhed to our honour. But in whoſe eyes will ſuch perſons, or a nation compoſed of ſuch, be honoured? and for what qualifications? Knowledge and prudence require induſtry and experience to attain them; worth and probity require thoughtful ſelf-inſpection. And one doth not ſee, how they, who claim only outſide pre-eminences, can poſſibly eſteem one another; or why they ſhould wiſh to herd ſo much together, unleſs to take comfort in their mutual want of merit. At leaſt vain opinion will never convert ſhew into ſubſtance. We muſt ſurely know, that we are capable of more valuable accompliſhments, and of delighting in them. Probably our education hath furniſhed us with ſome experience of improving our underſtandings and our tempers. Have we no room left then for farther improvements? Or have we loſt the reliſh of them? And for what better have we exchanged it? Or how unhappily ſoever we were bred, as indeed too many young people are extremely pitiable for having been taught the leaſt of what was moſt worth learning; yet we muſt be ſenſible, there are thoſe, who poſſeſs more ſolid endowments. Are they then of no value in life, or have they not in all ages been allowed to be of the higheſt? Why therefore ſhould not we ſtrive to reſemble them, and take a little leiſure to think, how we may live to more purpoſe? It may be, we do not deſire leiſure to think. It is unentertaining: it is painful. But what a figure do we make to others and ourſelves, if we cannot bear our own company, but muſt fly to any thing, rather than fail to get rid of it? Thought can be painful only becauſe we are acting amiſs: and then thinking ſo as to amend, is the only remedy; and no caſe is too far gone for it. Perhaps we are unable to carry on ſolitary meditation to any good effect. But we can have recourſe to the aſſiſtance of proper books. Idle reading indeed completes the deſtruction of the time, that idle converſation ſpares us. But judicious writings on the ſubject of conduct, religious, moral, and

and prudent, are at once the medicine and the nouriſhment of the mind. If ſtill after theſe we want farther inſtruction, every true friend we have, every good man we conſult, will gladly give it us. And with ſuch helps, why ſhould we not aſſert our ſhare in the dignity of human nature?

But poſſibly we aſpire to appear advantageouſly both in weightier matters, and lighter, And by due application, moſt people may, as far as they need. But then the chief regard muſt ever be paid to the principal point. For even elegant and liberal and learned accompliſhments have, by excluding ſtill better things, greatly diminiſhed the value of many characters. And when ſuch attainments, as barely, if at all, riſe above indifferent, or perhaps ſink below it, divide our eſteem with laudable ones, the mixture will do great harm, both to ourſelves, and, by its example, to others. But when they are the main objects of our ambition: the applauſe of the unthinking, ſhould we procure it, will be bought much too dear; the ſoul will loſe its vigour and grow frivolous; matters of conſequence become diſtaſteful; by degrees the very notion, which are ſo, will be effaced: and a group of the reigning follies of the time being, engroſs the heart. But particularly ſelf-government will be forgotten in the midſt of ſelf-indulgences, that will pretend to be harmleſs, till they prove undeniably criminal. In theſe circumſtances, the buſineſs of our ſtations, the examination of our affairs, the care of thoſe who are moſt intimately connected with us, and, much more, the inſpection of our hearts, of our ſtate towards God, of our title to a happy eternity, will be continually poſtponed, or ſuperficially hurried over, to comply with every trifling engagement, every ſudden fancy, or even mere indolence. And perhaps, rather than take the pains of knowing and doing what we ought, we ſhall make it our refuge to profeſs a contempt of it: in which abſurd declaration, a natural or acquired fluency of lively talk will bear people out ſo well to thoſe, with whom ſimilarity of manners prompts them to aſſociate, that before it is long, they will ſeem quite ſatisfied in neglecting every thing they ſhould mind.

Yet all the while, what they call a life of pleaſure is very often only an affectation of being pleaſed. They put on airs of great gaiety, and in truth their pleaſures are flat and inſipid: they relieve one taſteleſs ſcene by another a little different; are miſerable in the intervals of their amuſements,

and far from happy during the continuance of them. Nay indeed, under colour of relaxations, they are, to thoſe who engage thoroughly in them, ſore fatigues; from which, whether they will confeſs it or not, relaxation is much wanted: and ſome undergo a ſpeedy, and many a lingering, martyrdom to them. If religion enjoined men to mortify and macerate themſelves at this rate, what dreadful names would it be called! In all likelihood, were the truth known, numbers would chuſe a quieter way of living, if one part of them could be ſure, that the other would keep them in countenance. It is great pity, therefore, but they ſhould mutually explain themſelves on this tyranny of faſhion: and not go on together in wild chaſes of imaginary pleaſure, when they had all rather ſit ſtill. But farther, ſeveral, that would be ſorry to quit their diverſions, follow them only to baniſh reflection on ſome bad or imprudent thing that they have done, or courſe that they are in. Now as this can be no better than a palliative cure, and will uſually exaſperate the diſeaſe, they ought to ſeek a more effectual remedy. And we ſhould all conſider, that probably the ſame entertainments will not for ever afford us the ſame delight: and yet by long uſe it may grow or ſeem hardly poſſibly to do without them, though they not only miſbecome, but even tire us. Nay ſome, when they have once fixed it in their minds, that happineſs conſiſts in gaiety, and find the innocent ſorts of gay enjoyments are become taſteleſs, venture, for the ſake of a higher reliſh, on ſuch as are pernicious even in this world.

Another conſideration, both of prudence and duty, is, that the many expences of this public ſort of life are exceſſive; and to ſupply them, creditors are frequently left unpaid, except the leaſt deſerving; due proviſion for children is omitted, and ignominious arts of raiſing money practiſed. Or if the votaries of pleaſure do obſerve juſtice, let them aſk their conſciences, what proportion of their income goes in works of piety, mercy, encouragement of uſeful undertakings, and what in luxurious trifles? It will be ſaid, that theſe laſt do good by ſetting the poor to labour. But is our intention to do good by them, or only to gratify our vanity and voluptuouſneſs? Beſides, much more good is done by procuring health to the ſick, right education to the young, inſtruction to the ignorant and vicious, or by durable works of general utility and national

tional honour. And employing the lower part of the people in miniſtering to the luxury of the higher, can no more enrich or ſupport a kingdom, than employing the ſervants of a private family in the ſame manner, can enrich or ſupport that.

But one faſhionable expence muſt be particularly mentioned: that which bears the name, often very falſely, of play. Be it for ever ſo little, conſuming much time in it, is the moſt unimproving and irrational employment that can be. But falſe ſhame and emulation frequently raiſe it to a very incommodious and diſtreſſing height, even amongſt thoſe who profeſs to be moderate. And the lengths that others go, are the moſt ſpeedily and abſolutely ruinous of all things. The more calmly men bear their loſſes, the worſe; if they are the leſs likely to leave off for it. But uſually they feel moſt tormenting agitations: yet ruſh on to loſe more, from a groundleſs hope of gain; and perhaps at length call in diſhoneſty to the aid of imprudence. I am unwilling to name the worſt act of deſperation, to which extravagant and vicious indulgences too frequently lead. But ſurely it cannot fail to be viſible, that deliberately and preſumptuouſly ending an immoral and miſchievous life, by the impious and falſe bravery of a voluntary death, inſtead of an humble and exemplary penitence, is the completeſt rebellion againſt God, of which the heart of man is capable.

Another conſiderable ingredient in the favourite amuſements of the world, are public ſpectacles. And provided regard be had to time and coſt, they might be allowably and beneficially frequented, if they were preſerved from tendencies dangerous to virtue. But failings in that article totally alter the nature of them; and groſs failings reflect not only on our morals, but our taſte. Indeed it is lamentable that, fond as we are of adopting the faſhions and qualities of our neighbours, often much for the worſe, we ſhould not import what is praiſeworthy in them, but ſuffer the moſt diſſolute of them to excel us in the chaſtity of their dramatical repreſentations: yet after all, were they ever ſo innocent, in proportion as they are trifling and inſignificant, they are contemptible and unworthy of regard.

But the effects of leſs general amuſements, even of thoſe at our own houſes, may be extremely hurtful, if they are the means

means of admitting perſons of profligate conduct and principles into familiar converſation and acquaintance with others. For hence they will have the encouragement of finding, that they need not either amend or conceal their faults to be well received. The inconſiderate, that is, moſt people, ſeeing little or no difference made between good and bad characters, will perſuade themſelves on occaſion, that there can be no great difference between good and bad actions. But the young, above all, will be likely to admire thoſe, whom it extremely concerns them to abhor. For, in ſpite of the moſt prudent cautions, which however are not always given them, they are eaſily impoſed on by a ſhewy appearance, joined with plauſible talk. And the common talk of ſuch aſſemblies, though it were never openly to aſſault virtue, which yet may be eſpecially feared in ſuch of them where people converſe in diſguiſes, and are or may ſeem unknown to each other, hath notwithſtanding many things to undermine good principles, and weaken right ſentiments, particularly the continual ſuppoſition on which this whole way of living is built, that entertainment is the buſineſs of our being. They whoſe only ſchool is the world, will think ſo of courſe: and in ſuch places cannot be ſafely contradicted. Poſſibly, with all this, there may be no immediate ſtrong ſymptoms of much harm ſuffered in them. But ſtill, as a courſe of ſober intemperance may damage the health more, than great exceſſes now and then; ſo may a life, ſeemingly but a little too gay, corrupt the heart more, than a few acts of confeſſed immorality.

And beſides the direct danger to morals, what influence will it have on piety? About that perhaps we are not ſolicitous. And yet the firm belief of a future recompence muſt be the beſt ſecurity of right behaviour in all circumſtances. And the king of the whole earth cannot but require to have the due reſpect and homage he hath appointed paid him by his ſubjects, as neceſſary to preſerve that obedience to his laws, without which it is impoſſible they ſhould be happy. Yet the public worſhip of God, even on that day which he hath appropriated to it, is almoſt intirely neglected by the greateſt part of thoſe who live to amuſements; and by many of them profeſſedly and contemptuouſly; though poſſibly attending it might afford them ſome inſtruction, as well as expreſs proper duty. Much leſs do they regard any other ſeaſons, appointed for the peculiar

peculiar exerciſe of ſerioufneſs: but, it may be, affect to crowd diverſions into the moſt ſacred week of it; either in wanton defiance of public authority and common decency, or in oſtentation of their imagined ſuperiority to vulgar ways of thinking. But ſurely others know as well as they, that outward obſervances in themſelves are nothing. But ſtill, by their effects, both in civil and religious matters, they are very important things: and may be uſeful to the wiſeſt perſons. Though, indeed, when there is a little weakneſs mixed with piety and virtue, they have no title to ridicule it, who are guilty of the numberleſs abſurdities of diſſoluteneſs or profaneneſs. And though the moſt innocent ſuperſtition ſhould be ſeparated from religion if it can, yet not with the hazard of rooting up both together.

But ſuppoſing we pay ſufficient regard to theſe external proprieties, what diſpoſition doth our attachment to pleaſure leave us towards inward devotion? Do we pray to God in private? Is it with attention and reverence? And doth that regulate the reſt of the day, or the reſt of the day wear out the impreſſion of that? Do we ſtatedly think of our intereſt in the divine favour, and our approaching ſtate after death, as our main concerns? And do we not only fear the Judge of all, but love the Father of Mercy, ſuch as he hath exhibited himſelf to man, by giving his Son to die for us, and his Holy Spirit to move us to all good? Or hath not our manner of living deadened our feeling of theſe things, if ever we had any: and are we not proceeding to efface the ſmall remnants of them? This is not the behaviour of a rational creature, of a penitent for ſin, of a candidate for eternal felicity: there can ariſe from it no *meetneſs for the inheritance of the ſaints of light**, no ſuſceptibility of ſpiritual happineſs, no hope of *eſcaping the damnation of hell*†. Not only a few of our detached hours, but our whole being is God's, and to be employed as he approves. Our lawful daily buſineſs, nay our needful relaxations from it, we may humbly preſent to him, as part of what he deſigned us for. But can we offer up a ſeries of nothing but idle diſſipations, or worſe, and beg him to accept of that? Our baptiſmal vow promiſed other things for us: the holy ſcripture hath preſcribed us a very different ſort of conduct: hath told us, that we *cannot*

* Col. i. 12. † Matth. xxiii. 33.

*cannot ſerve two maſters**; that they, *who live in pleaſure, are dead, while they live*†; that he, who delighted himſelf ſplendidly every day, and took this for his portion, *lift up his eyes in torment*‡. And are we then willing, both to fail of reward, and ſuffer puniſhment? Perhaps the latter may ſeem unjuſt, merely for ſpending our days in harmleſs diverſions. But if otherwiſe they were harmleſs, would not a ſervant of ours merit puniſhing, who for his own gratification ſhould obſtinately neglect his allotted ſhare of work in the family? Now we are the ſervants of our Maker: and he hath forewarned us, that a *ſlothful ſervant* ſhall be deemed *a wicked one*§.

But the life of thoſe, who love pleaſure more than God, is fuller of guilt, in proportion as it gives others a more public invitation to live in the ſame way. If the rich and great proclaim, that voluptuous amuſements are their paſſion, and religion their contempt; as it will provoke the better part of their inferiors to think ill of them, which is a very undeſirable thing, ſo it will incline the larger part, without thinking at all well of them, to imitate their example. For if they may behave ſo, the concluſion will be boldly drawn, that every one elſe may. And yet the effects of that perſuaſion muſt be inſupportable. For how ſhall our domeſtics, and neareſt relations, all we have concerns with, and the body of the people in general, be kept from every thing that is wrong and miſchievous, in the midſt of ſuch numerous temptations, if they learn from us to make ſelf-indulgence, unreſtrained by the apprehenſions of a future account, their governing principle? Our laws cannot be executed with rigour: and legiſlators and magiſtrates will not be thought in earneſt, or, if they are, will be thought injurious, when they prohibit what the practice of too many of them ſhews, they look upon as the only happy life.

People of faſhion, eſpecially of that ſex, which aſcribes to itſelf the moſt knowledge, have nearly thrown off all obſervation of the Lord's day: perhaps keep ſuch hours, that neither they, nor their families, can go to church, at leaſt in one part of it: will vary thoſe hours readily for any other purpoſe, but by no means for this. And when they have paſſed the morning and afternoon in neglect of piety, numbers of them paſs the evening in what they know will be commonly interpreted, and the more for that neglect, an open contradiction to

* Matth. vi. 24. † 1 Tim. v. 6.
‡ Luke xvi. 19, 23. § Matth. xxv. 26.

to piety. Or if, to avoid ſcandal, they ſometimes vouchſafe their attendance on divine ſervice in the country, they ſeldom or never do it in town: where patterns of it are peculiarly needful; and from whence accounts of their behaviour will ſoon be ſpread to the remoteſt places where they have influence. Now by theſe means the Sunday, inſtead of being made, to thoſe beneath them, the uſefulleſt part of their time, by religious worſhip and inſtruction, reading and thought; as well as the pleaſanteſt, by reſt from labour and friendly intercourſe; becomes the moſt pernicious. A large proportion of the tradeſmen in theſe two cities uſually ſpend the whole of it abroad in diverſions, often vicious, always coſtly: and by affecting them then, get a ruinous taſte for them throughout the week. The lower ſort ſtill are ambitious to follow them as cloſe as they can, every day indeed, but on that eſpecially: conſume the beginning of it, in ſtupid ſloth, the remainder in lewdneſs or drunkenneſs, which impair their faculties and deſtroy their health; beſides intercepting the profits of their labour from thoſe, whom it ſhould maintain. And if they once come to think gaming alſo allowable on that only time, in which they have leiſure for it; the loſers will be yet more thoroughly undone and deſperate, and the winners not the richer, but only the more debauched.

Every ſpecies of wickedneſs cannot fail to make a great progreſs amidſt theſe licentious principles and practices: which are induſtriouſly propagated, both by the diſcourſe of bad men, contrary to all common prudence, and in books alſo, publiſhed not only againſt revealed religion, (which they who diſbelieve will few of them believe any, and none to any great purpoſe) but againſt a future recompence of human actions; and ſuited, in the manner of writing, to every reader, and, in the price, to every purchaſer. Such as have learnt theſe leſſons, will yield, and no wonder, to the preſent ſolicitation of each appetite and each fancy, be the conſequences what they may. When they are diſtreſſed, they will venture on whatever crime they think may enable them to go on a little longer: they will endeavour to conceal a firſt crime by a ſecond; and if at laſt they cannot evade puniſhment, they will deſpiſe it. For what is even death, which every one may make as eaſy as he pleaſes, if they neither hope nor fear any thing after it?

We of the clergy are principally concerned to oppoſe this torrent of impiety: and I truſt we do it with faithful zeal. But the immediate anſwer to us is, that we are pleading our own cauſe; though indeed it is that of the public. And therefore the hearty concurrence of the laity, jointly countenancing, by their examples, their favours, their commendations, their reproofs, by reverence to religion, moderation in pleaſures, frugality in expence, diligence in the buſineſs of every one's proper ſtation, is highly neceſſary: and will complete the bleſſing of the fulleſt liberty, and moſt fatherly adminiſtration of government, that ever nation enjoyed; which otherwiſe we are in imminent danger of abuſing, to our own deſerved ruin.

Yet too great ſtrictneſs may do harm, or diſqualify for doing good: and according to circumſtances, partaking of amuſements, that otherwiſe are not eligible, may be very prudent: beſides that ſome may be under ſuch authority and direction, as may oblige them in duty to do what they cannot intirely approve. And then they ſhould endeavour to do it both obligingly and gracefully: but always remember, that they are on ſlippery ground: never go farther, than is really innocent; never farther, than they need: much leſs, blame or deſpiſe thoſe, who are unwilling or unqualified to bear a part with them: but carefully preſerve a juſt preference for the higher order of obligations; be humble in the midſt of pomp, attentive to ſerious reflections in the midſt of gaity; do all they can, without expoſing themſelves, to guard or bring back others; and ſeize every opportunity of promoting what is right, where too generally what is wrong abounds.

But they who are not called to enter far into the livelier ſcenes of this world, will do very commendably, to ſhew by facts, in a freer and opener manner, their ſettled perſuaſion that happineſs conſiſts in quite other matters; to ſhew, that they can enjoy themſelves perfectly well, without having any reliſh for theſe; nay, can abſtain from them without difficulty, though they have a reliſh for them. And the more they do ſo, keeping up their good humour, the more exemplary they are. But the clergy ſhould be patterns of this abſtinence beyond all others. For if inſtead of being grave and ſtudious and laborious in our profeſſion, we diſſipate ourſelves in vanities, or ſink into luxurious delicacy or indolence; the

the awe of our character, and the weight of our preaching will be loſt: the thoughtleſs will imagine they may ſafely ſtep a little farther than we; and thus will fall into palpable ſin: while the indifferent to religion and virtue will make it their boaſt, that we aim to be as like them, as for ſhame we can; and will *blaſpheme*, on our account, *the worthy name, by which we are called**.

Poſſibly ſo many cautions againſt fondneſs for pleaſure may ſeem to leave thoſe who regard them, in a very joyleſs and uneaſy condition. But indeed they are only plain and very practicable rules for that diſcipline of our temper and conduct, which is neceſſary for our true happineſs even here, and for true happineſs even here, and for our eternal felicity hereafter. Chriſtian piety allows us, under ſuch regulations as are evidently reaſonable, every enjoyment of ſenſe, every delight of elegant taſte, every exertion of ſocial cheerfulneſs; and forbids nothing, but miſchief, madneſs and miſery. Then beſides, it heightens to the utmoſt all the nobler ſatisfactions of the mind: that of ſincere good will to all men: that of tender complacency in thoſe, to whom we are united more nearly: whence proceed honourable eſteem, and affectionate returns. Or, though we miſs the regard we deſerve from men, we ſhall have a reviving conſciouſneſs, that we have acted worthily, that we have laboured to promote goodneſs and happineſs on earth, that the ſins and ſufferings of our fellow-creatures are not owing to us. This applauding teſtimony of our hearts will indeed be mixed with the grief of many failings: but alſo, with the aſſurance, that our heavenly Father forgives them, for the ſake of our gracious Redeemer; with the experience, that he is enabling us to overcome them, by the grace of our inward Sanctifier, and preparing us daily for the bleſſedneſs, to which he invites us. For ſuch mercies we cannot but love him, and whoever doth ſo, is in proportion beloved by him. The ſenſe of this muſt give us great compoſure about every thing worldly, diſdain of every thing vicious, and comfort in going through the very loweſt and hardeſt acts of duty. We ſhall paſs the days of our pilgrimage in as much delight as the nature of it affords: and when we come to our final abode, every capacity of ſpiritual enjoyment, to which we have improved

* James ii, 7.

ourſelves here, ſhall be inconceivably angmented, and completely filled: we ſhall *be abundantly ſatisfied with the fatneſs of God's houſe, and drink of the river of his pleaſures**. *For in his preſence is the fullneſs of joy, and at his right hand there are pleaſures for evermore*†.

* Pſal. xxxvi. 8. † Pſal. xvi. 11.

SER-

SERMON XLVIII.

JESUS CHRIST THE AUTHOR AND FINISHER OF OUR FAITH, AND A PERFECT PATTERN FOR OUR IMITATION.

HEB. xii. 2.

Looking unto Jeſus, the author and finiſher of our faith: who, for the joy that was ſet before him, endured the croſs, deſpiſing the ſhame, and is ſet down at the right hand of the throne of God.

DIRECTING our eye is neceſſary for guiding our ſteps; and therefore the apoſtle here directs the eye of our mind to Jeſus Chriſt: whom if we ſo contemplate, as to learn what he was, and expects us to be, nothing will be wanting to carry us happily through the journey of life. And it may be uſeful to begin with conſidering his familiar manifeſtation of himſelf on earth, whence we ſhall naturally be led to conſider his higher and more awful glories.

Now in this loweſt view, we ſhall find him to have been the moſt amiable and the moſt venerable perſon, beyond all compariſon, that the world ever knew. Meditate only with ſerious attention on the evidently artleſs account given of him in the goſpels, and you will ſee, with an admiration continually increaſing, how perfect his character was in every point: how warm his ſentiments, yet how juſt his notions, of piety to his heavenly Father; how ſtrong and affectionate his expreſſions of it; yet how rational, and how peculiarly ſuitable to his very peculiar ſituation: how compoſed his reſignation, though with the acuteſt feeling of all that he underwent; and how firm his truſt in God even at the hour of death, under the moſt painful ſenſe of the light of his countenance being

being withdrawn from him: how regular his practice of the whole of religion, yet how accurate his preference of one part of it to another: how active and bold and perſevering his zeal; yet how completely free from all the weakneſs, and all the bitterneſs, with which zeal is too often accompanied; how intimately tempered with patience towards the ſlow of apprehenſion; eſteem for the well-meaning though erroneous; pity for the bad, though perverſe and incorrigible: what perpetual demonſtrations he gave, of benevolence and purity in his teaching, of goodneſs and condeſcenſion, meekneſs and tenderneſs, in his behaviour, to all perſons, however provoking, on all occaſions, however trying: yet goodneſs judiciouſly exerciſed, condeſcenſion with dignity, meekneſs with due ſeverity againſt ſin, tenderneſs without partiality, or improper compliances, to the neareſt of his kindred, or the deareſt of his diſciples: how compaſſionate a love he ſhewed to his country; yet how unlimited a good-will to all the world: how remote he was from ſelf-indulgence, yet how far from encouraging uſeleſs rigour and auſterity: how diligently he turned the thoughts of the multitude, from empty admirations of his diſcourſes or his works, to the conſcientious performance of their own duties: declined the moſt favourable opportunities of riſing to worldly power, and inculcated on his followers the ſtrongeſt warnings of what he and they were to ſuffer: with what plainneſs he reproved both the people and their rulers, yet with what care he ſecured the reſpect owing from the former to the latter: with what ſimplicity and upright prudence he anſwered the objections and captious queſtions levelled againſt him, however ſuddenly attacked by them; and though in ſo public a life tried every way continually, never once was overcome, never once diſconcerted: how ſurpriſingly he avoided all the artifices and all the violence of his enemies, as long as he choſe it; and how much ſuperior, not only to them, but, if poſſible, even to himſelf, he appeared, after he had put himſelf into their hands, during the whole of their barbarous and deſpiteful treatment. Nor can it fail to be obſerved, as a moſt important circumſtance, that all his wonderful perfections were evidently natural to him, and ſet abſolutely eaſy upon him, without the leaſt variation, or inequality, or effort exerted to raiſe himſelf up to, or ſupport, the higheſt excellence, that he ever diſplayed. In ſhort, the character of

Jeſus

Jeſus Chriſt, like the frame of God's creation, the more deeply it is ſtudied, the more reſpectfully it will be admired. Some ſmall particulars in each, yet much fewer than ſuperficial obſervers imagine, it may be eaſier to cavil at, than to account for diſtinctly: but look at the whole of either, and to every eye that is capable of taking in a whole, it will approve itſelf uniformly great and good.

Now that he, of whom theſe things are recorded, was a real man, and not a phantom of the imagination, infidelity itſelf hath never denied. And that he was truly the excellent man, that the goſpels deſcribe him to have been, we have the teſtimony of numbers that knew him, of more who converſed with thoſe that knew him; who all aſſerted it in the ſtrongeſt terms, and ſuffered every thing terrible for ſo doing. Their enemies were never able to diſprove them: if they had, chriſtianity muſt have ſunk: and indeed ſome of the moſt conſiderable of their enemies, in all ages, have owned them to be ſo far in the right. But if ſtill it be pretended, that his portrait was drawn too favourably; who could draw it ſo? The *Greeks* and *Romans* never drew any from life or fancy, without ſome capital fault. How came the *Jews*, how came the illiterate Evangeliſts, by ſuch extraordinary ſkill? And further, how came they to aſcribe ſuch mild, ſuch paſſive virtues, to their Meſſiah, whom the whole nation expected to be, on the contrary, an enterprizing and proſperous warrior? Had one of them deviated ſo unaccountably from the general opinion; is it credible that they all ſhould? Had every one of them attempted to make a beautiful picture of that ſort, without regard to the original; would all their pictures have been alike, yet each diſtinguiſhed by ſuch peculiarities, as proved none of them to be copied from the other? Or ſuppoſing even that, could they have perſuaded an unwilling world, that theſe reſembled this original, when plainly they did not?

Now if their narratives be faithful deſcriptions of a real perſon, well may we aſk, as the *Jews* did with another ſpirit, *Whence hath this man theſe things; and what wiſdom is this, which is given unto him*? Is not this the carpenter's ſon†?* What education had he to form him, what patterns to form himſelf upon, to become the man he was? By what train of thinking could he be led to conceive, by what proſpects could he

* Mark vi. 2. † Matth. xiii. 55.

he be moved to undertake, by what power was he enabled to accompliſh, the unparalleled things he did? To imagine that ſuch a one exiſted by accident, is monſtrouſly unreaſonable. But that he ſhould alſo have fallen by accident, juſt into that ſingle country, in which there was a ſyſtem of religion, that he could build on, with a ſeries of predictions applicable to himſelf; and juſt at that period too, which theſe predictions had ſo pointed out, as to raiſe an univerſal expectation of him: that under all the diſadvantages of a low condition, he ſhould have ſpirits enough to make and maintain the higheſt of claims; ſagacity enough to interpret the ancient oracles in a much ſublimer and juſter ſenſe, than any of the moſt learned inſtructors of the people, and ſelf-denial enough to prefer, in conſequence of theſe interpretations, perſecution and crucifixion, before the ſafety of a private ſtation, or the ſplendor of offered dominion: that every one of theſe things (and others equally ſtrange might be added) ſhould meet in the ſame man, without the ſpecial appointment of heaven, exceeds all power of chance. Conſider him only as a mere man, he appears to have been unſpeakably the greateſt and beſt of men. Conſider only thoſe conſequences of his coming into the world, which even unbelievers muſt acknowledge, he appears to be the moſt important perſon that ever did come into it. The general reaſonableneſs of his doctrine, the coolneſs of his temper, the compoſedneſs and familiarity of his whole converſation, prove he was no enthuſiaſt: the unvaried goodneſs of his life, the willingneſs with which he ſuffered death, the impoſſibility, which his underſtanding could not but ſee, of attaining any worldly advantage by the courſe which he took; nay indeed, the difficulties which he left in ſome articles of his ſcheme, and needed not, if he had contrived it to ſerve a turn, prove full as evidently, that he was no impoſtor. What muſt he have been then? And what elſe can we gather from his whole behaviour, than what the ſpectators did from the finiſhing ſcene of it upon the croſs: *Truly this was the ſon of God**.

But if indeed a title ſo tranſcendent belongs to *Jeſus*, we are ſurely bound to learn, with the utmoſt docility, from the ſcriptures written by his direction, what it comprehends, and what is connected with it. There we read, that *in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word*

* Matth. xxvii. 54.

word was God[a]: that by him the Father created all things, and by him hath conducted, ever ſince, the concerns of this world; whence he is called, in the text, *the Author and Finiſher of our Faith.* He laid the ground-work of it immediately on the fall of our firſt parents, the conſequences of which we all feel, in the gracious intimation given them, that *the ſeed of the woman*† ſhall deſtroy the ſerpent's power: and afterwards made valuable additions to it of *precious promiſes*‡ from time to time. When idolatry and vice had overſpread the reſt of the world; he preſerved it with peculiar care in one nation, *as a light ſhining in a dark place*§, for the benefit of all, who would turn their eyes towards it; and, by a chain of wonderful providences, brought on the proper ſeaſon for diffuſing it throughout the earth. Then he diveſted himſelf of *the glory which he had with the Father before the world was*‖; *the word became fleſh, and dwelt among ſt us*¶; taught men in perſon the great truths of religion, confirmed them by beneficent miracles performed, and illuſtrious prophecies fulfilled; exemplified them, as I have ſaid, in his practice; and provided the means of their deſcending uncorrupted to all future ages, and being efficaciouſly applied to the conviction of the wicked, and the comfort of the good. So fully is he, and he could not be more fully, what the apoſtle calls him: who next reminds us, that in carrying on this inconceivably kind work, he willingly underwent all manner of ill uſage, and at length *endured* the pain, and *deſpiſed the ſhame, of the croſs*, inflicted on him by wretches, for whom his precepts were too holy, and his life too harmleſs; that ſo he might demonſtrate his ſincerity, and ſet a pattern of doing the hardeſt things, which he taught. Nay, he ſubmitted farther, to become the repreſentative of tranſgreſſors; to be forſaken of God, and have his ſoul made ſorrowful unto death, in that myſterious diſpenſation of laying on him the iniquities of us all: in order to give the moſt tremendous proof of the heinouſneſs of ſin; that ſuch a one as he ſhould ſuffer ſo much, to induce the juſt and wiſe, though equally merciful, Ruler of all to forgive it, and engage and enable the guilty to forſake it.

[a] John i. 1. † Gen. iii. 15. ‡ 2 Pet. i. 4.
§ Verſe 19. ‖ John xvii. 5. ¶ John i. 14.

Theſe things he did, the text goes on to ſay, *for the joy that was ſet before him:* the joy of illuſtrating at once the holineſs and goodneſs of God, who appointed and accepted this method of our ſalvation; the joy of reforming and making happy, in themſelves and one another, in time and to eternity, all thoſe multitudes, who in every generation ſhould embrace his offers; and laſtly, the joy of being deſervedly honoured, as the bleſſed inſtrument of theſe ineſtimable benefits.

Accordingly he hath the honour, as the apoſtle proceeds to obſerve, of ſitting down at the right hand of the throne of God: being placed, in reſpect of that nature which he condeſcended to aſſume, and the ſufferings of which are thus properly rewarded, in a ſtate of ſupreme felicity, at the head of the whole creation, *angels and authorities being made ſubject unto him**. And in this exalted ſtation he ſhall remain, ſuperintending the affairs of the univerſe, till he returns to our earth at the day of judgement. Then *every eye ſhall ſee him, and they alſo which pierced him*†, they which blaſpheme him, and they which profeſſing, yet *obey not his goſpel; who ſhall be puniſhed with everlaſting deſtruction from the preſence of the Lord, when he ſhall come to be glorified in his ſaints, and to be admired in all them that believe*‡.

This then is he, to whom we are directed to look: to *look off*, for ſo the word ſignifies, from other objects, unſafe or unworthy, and contemplate him: nor only as the moſt excellent of men, but being raiſed *far above every name that is named* either *in this world, or that which is to come*§; nor only as thus eminent in himſelf, but as our greateſt benefactor and trueſt friend; our wiſe lawgiver and ſpotleſs example; the ſacrifice by whoſe blood we are waſhed from our ſins; the head of the body, of which we are members; the judge, on whoſe ſentence our everlaſting ſtate depends: our prophet, our prieſt and our king; our Saviour, *our Lord and our God*¶.

Surely of ſuch a one it ſeems impoſſible to think lowly: and almoſt unavoidable to think often and much. Yet were we to examine ourſelves, how frequently or how ſeldom we recollect his perfections, and our moſt intereſting relations to

* 1 Pet. iii. 22. † Rev. i. 7. ‡ 2 Theſſ. i. 8, 9, 10.
§ Eph. i. 21. ¶ John xx. 28.

to him; whether we are ſtrongly or ſlightly affected by them; whether we principally attend to his rules of life, or thoſe which are ſuggeſted by inconſiderate cuſtom, vicious inclination, or vain ſelf-opinion, falſely called reaſon; whether, even if we mean to do well, we pray with humility for his grace, or truſt our own imagined ſtrength; and laſtly, whether after *doing all* we can, we rely on his merits, as *unprofitable ſervants**, or hope for ſalvation by our own ſinful good deeds; what anſwer muſt the conſciences of many of us make? Such undoubtedly as will at leaſt evidence the need of fixing our thoughts upon him much more ſteadily, than we have done; of ſtirring up in our hearts the warmeſt ſentiments of reverence, gratitude and love towards him; (for who can be equally intitled to them, or what employment ſo delightful or beneficial?) and of exerting them in every act, which he hath appointed, or his followers found ſerviceable. External acts of themſelves indeed are nothing: but when they proceed from a good principle within, and are choſen and uſed with diſcretion, and keep up the vigour of the mind, and ſtrengthen good habits inexpreſſibly. The importance of them in civil affairs is every where acknowledged: and how can we fancy it to be leſs in religious? Therefore if indeed we honour our Redeemer, we muſt ſhew that we honour his ſacraments, his ordinances, the weekly, the yearly days conſecrated to him, the places of his worſhip: permit me to add, his miniſters, only being careful to diſtinguiſh, for the ſake of our maſter and of mankind, the devout, the laborious, the diſintereſted, from the lovers of pleaſure or gain, of power or applauſe, from the formal, the thoughtleſs, the lukewarm.

Nor will he, whoſe reſpect to *the author and finiſher of our faith* is real, either ſeek or wiſh to ſhelter himſelf from infidel ſcorn by leaving the motives of his conduct in religious matters doubtful: but openly, though decently, make it known to all men, of which ſide he in truth is; and do at leaſt as much for the cauſe of God, as he could with propriety for any other, that he hath at heart: recollecting that thus the pious will be animated, the oppoſers ſtaggered, the indolent awakened; and likewiſe, that them only *who confeſs him before men, will Jeſus confeſs before his Father which is in heaven*†.

* Luke xv. ii. 10. † Matth. x. 32.

But zeal for his mission and doctrines will be of no avail, without imitation of his example and obedience to his laws. As on the one hand, the virtue which men profess without religion, the religion which they profess without christianity, the christianity which they profess without affection to Christ, is essentially imperfect, and mostly nominal; they model it into what they please, and it wastes away to nothing: so on the other, not only hypocritical, but partial, attachment to him, fondness for him as the obtainer of pardon and future happiness, and slight of him as the director of life; hoping to be saved by faith without works, or waiting for his grace to amend us without taking pains to amend ourselves; these things *put* his gospel and *him to open shame**. We must *look unto Jesus*, as our exemplar and legislator: else we shall look to him in vain as our Saviour.

Some of his actions indeed were appropriated to his office; and some of his precepts, to that of his apostles. But whatever was temporary or singular in either, is easily discerned, and the rest binds us all. Therefore we must *learn of him* to be *meek and lowly: for so shall we find rest for our souls*†. We must condescend, when occasion requires, to the meanest instances of mutual service: for *our Master and Lord washed his disciples feet, that they should do as he had done to them*‡. We must take the most injurious provocations patiently: for 'he, *when he was reviled, reviled not again, when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously*§. We must *forgive one another, as God for Christ's sake* is ready to *forgive us*‖. We must *speak the truth every man with his neighbour*¶, for there *was no guile found in his mouth***. We must be *harmless and undefiled, separate from sinners*††, in our temper and practice, even when obliged to be most in their company; for so was he, conversing with them, as a physician with the sick. In a word, *the same mind* must *be in us, which was in Christ Jesus*‡‡ our Lord.

And we must not only avoid gross transgressions and omissions; but *purify ourselves as he is pure*§§, and *perfect holiness in*

* Heb. vi. 6. † Matth. xi. 29. ‡ John xiii. 5, 13, 15.
§ 1 Pet. ii. 23. ‖ Eph. iv. 32. ¶ Eph. iv. 25.
** 1 Pet. ii. 22. †† Heb. vii. 26. ‡‡ Phil. ii. 5. §§ 1 John iii. 3.

*in the fear of God**. Ambition, worldlineſs, delicacy, voluptuouſneſs, diſſipation, eagerneſs for amuſements and trifles, are utterly beneath us, and unſuitable to our profeſſion. A chriſtian is a character of dignity: and though he ſubmits with a graceful willingneſs to whatever his condition here demands; yet he *ſets his affection* only *on the things above*†; and from the view of his Redeemer placed there at the right hand of God, draws his directions for his conduct below: reaſoning with St. *Paul, the love of Chriſt conſtraineth us, becauſe we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and he died for all, that they which live, ſhould not henceforth live unto themſelves, but unto him which died for them, and roſe again*‡.

Such as are duly moved by this conſideration will faithfully perform, not only the general duties of life, but the particular ones of their rank and circumſtances. Perſons in authority will reflect, that he who is *Lord of Lords*§, and *the prince of the kings of the earth*‖, hath deputed them for a work, ſimilar to his own final one, *the puniſhment of evil-doers, and the praiſe of them that do well*¶; and conſequently will inform themſelves concerning both. *He needed not*, when upon earth, *that any ſhould teſtify of man; for he knew what was in man***. But ſagacious inquiry and ſtrict obſervation are neceſſary for their executing that noble plan, which *David* hath laid down for them in the 101ſt Pſalm. Happy the nation, where it is purſued with gentleneſs and candor, yet with ſpirit and efficacy, that the ill-inclined *may hear and fear and do no more preſumptuouſly*††.

Again: the miniſters of the goſpel, if they look unto and *love the Lord Jeſus in ſincerity*‡‡, will imitate his aſſiduity in giving inſtruction, his compaſſion to penitents, his plain denunciations againſt obſtinate ſinners, his contempt of unjuſt reproach, yet his caution to guard againſt needleſs offence; will accommodate their diſcourſes as he did, to the wants, the diſpoſitions, the capacities of their hearers; *condeſcending* in this and all things *to men of low eſtate*§§: will remember that *his kingdom is not of this world*¶¶, and uſe whatever advantages they enjoy in it, to the purpoſes of the next: be in every

* 2 Cor. vii. 1. † Col. iii. 2. ‡ 2 Cor. v. 14, 15.
§ Rev. xxii. 14. ‖ Rev. i. 5. ¶ 1 Pet. ii 14.
** John ii. 25. †† Deut. xvii. 13. ‡‡ Eph. vi. 24.
§§ Rom. xxii. 16. ¶¶ John xviii. 36.

every good ſenſe, as he was, but in no bad one, *the friends of publicans and ſinners** ; neither act *as being lords over God's heritage, but enſamples to the flock; that when the chief ſhepherd ſhall appear, they may receive a crown of glory*†. *Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, conſider the apoſtle and high prieſt of our profeſſion*‡. Further yet: thoſe who have large incomes, if they fix their thoughts on him, *who for our ſakes became poor, that we, through his poverty, might become rich*§ *in good works*‖ and heavenly treaſures, will be powerfully excited not to place their happineſs either in the acquiſition or poſſeſſion of wealth, or the enjoyment of any of thoſe pleaſures which wealth can help to procure: but in doing good, as the bleſſed *Jeſus* did, and benefiting their *brethern for whom he died*¶. To do this more effectually, they will ſet an example of prudent ſelf-reſtraint and frugality, which may preſerve multitudes of others, if not themſelves, from follies and diſtreſſes: they will employ what is thus ſaved in acts of judicious charity; and have conſtantly in their minds what many, who are extremely liberal, ſtrangely forget, that all expences, and ſeeming bounties, which tend to corrupt morals, are miſchievous; and uſing methods to make men pious and virtuous, providing for their ſouls at the ſame time with their bodies, which our Saviour did continually, conduces beyond all things even to their preſent welfare.

Laſtly, they who are afflicted, (and who is not often ſo in one reſpect or another?) if they dwell, as the text was meant to adviſe them particularly, on the contemplation of our compaſſionate high-prieſt, *the man of ſorrows and acquainted with grief***, will learn from him to endure *all the contradiction of ſinners*, and all *the heavy yoke* that is laid *on the ſons of Adam*††, diſeſteem, ingratitude, perverſeneſs, inſolence, diſappointment, poverty, pain and death, without being *weary or faint in their minds* ‡‡. He, though faultleſs, endured much more than we ſinners ſhall be called to: under every trial *his grace will be ſufficient for us*§§: *if we ſuffer with him we ſhall alſo reign with him* ¶¶; the more we undergo, the greater will be our reward: and what have we then to reſent

* Matth. xi. 19. † 1 Pet. v. 3, 4. ‡ Heb. iii. 1.
§ 2 Cor. viii. 9. ‖ 1 Tim. vi. 18. ¶ Rom. xiv. 10, 15.
** Iſ. liii. 3. †† Eccluſ. xl. 1. ‡‡ Heb. xii. 3.
§§ 2 Cor. xii. 9. ¶¶ Tim. ii. 12.

ſent or fear, or be dejected about, or whom to envy? Miſerable comforts are all the worldly means, by which men labour in vain to deceive themſelves, and mitigate their wretchedneſs, compared with the *everlaſting conſolation and good hope, which our Lord Jeſus Chriſt hath given us**, whoſe words are, *to him that overcometh will I grant to ſit with me in my throne; even as I alſo overcame, and am ſet down with my Father in his throne*†.

Let every one therefore of every degree *fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life, whereunto he is called*‡: for theſe are *not cunningly deviſed fables*§ but *the true ſayings of God*‖. They who have hitherto lived in ſin, (and ſo far we all have, that *by* his obedience to *the law no man is juſtified in the ſight of God*¶) let them *flee* to the merciful Jeſus *from the wrath to come***, *acquaint themſelves with him, and be at peace*††. They that once had a ſenſe of religion, but *have left their firſt love*‡‡, drawn away by vicious indulgences, or temporal intereſts, or *the inſtruction that cauſeth to err from the words of knowledge*§§, let them remember from whence they are *fallen and repent, and do their firſt works*‖‖. They, who have hitherto perſevered in piety, let them form in themſelves, as they will always have room and need, a ſtill completer image of Chriſt. And let us all inceſſantly ſtudy to acquire that conſtant, that affectionate and influencing attention to him, for which St. *Peter* celebrates the early chriſtians, when he ſaith, *whom having not ſeen, ye love; in whom though now ye ſee him not, yet believing ye rejoice with joy unſpeakable and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith, even the ſalvation of your ſouls*¶¶

* 2 Theſſ. ii. 16. † Rev. iii. 21. ‡ 1 Tim. vi. 12.
§ 2 Pet. i. 16. ‖ Rev. xix. 9. ¶ Gal. ii. 16. iii. 11.
** Matth. iii. 7. †† Job. xxii. 21. ‡‡ Rev. ii 4.
§§ Prov. xix. 27. ‖‖ Rev. ii. 5. ¶¶ Pet. i. 8, 9.

SER-

SERMON XLIX.

The Genuine Doctrine of the Gospel, and the Causes of the Opposition of Jews and Gentiles to it.

1 Cor. i. 22, 23, 24.

For the Jews require a ſign, and the Greeks ſeek after wiſdom; But we preach Chriſt crucified; unto the Jews a ſtumbling block, and unto the Greeks fooliſhneſs;
But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Chriſt the power of God, and the wiſdom of God.

TO expect eternal life through a Saviour who died for us, is the fundamental doctrine of the Chriſtian profeſſion: the article, that diſtinguiſhes our faith from all others, and with which our religion ſtands or falls. The New Teſtament therefore dwells much on the importance of this belief: and eſpecially the epiſtles of St. *Paul* inculcate it every where. He *determined*, though a man of extenſive knowledge, *not to know any thing among* thoſe whom he inſtructed, to inſiſt on no ſubject, comparatively ſpeaking, *ſave Chriſt Jeſus, and him crucified**. Still both he, and the reſt of the apoſtles, muſt plainly foreſee, and they quickly experienced, as the preachers of the goſpel have done ever ſince, that the prejudices of many, and the pride of all men, would find much difficulty in ſubmitting to owe their ſalvation to another; eſpecially to one, who had lived ſo poor a life, and ſuffered ſo diſgraceful a death; which would all be avoided by teaching them to aſcribe the whole merit of it to themſelves. But *they had not ſo learned Chriſt*†, as to *handle the Word of God deceitfully*‡ They knew, that what ſeemed to human vanity weak and ill-judged, was the true and only way to heavenly happineſs. And therefore, though *the Jews required a ſign*, &c.

In

* 1 Cor. ii. 2. † Eph. iv. 20. ‡ 2 Cor. iv. 2.

In diſcourſing on theſe words, I ſhall endeavour to ſhew,

I. What it is to *preach Chriſt crucified.*

II. Whence it came to paſs, that this was *to the Jews a ſtumbling block, and to the Greeks fooliſhneſs.*

III. That, notwithſtanding, it places in a ſtrong light both *the power and the wiſdom of God.*

I. What it is to *preach Chriſt crucified.* Now this, in one word, is to lay before men the nature and terms of that *eternal ſalvation*, of which, by his ſuffering on the croſs, he is *become the author unto all that obey him**. More particularly it is to inſtruct them in the following great truths: that there ever hath, doth, and will exiſt, one infinite being, perfectly wiſe, juſt and good, the Almighty maker and ruler of the univerſe; who created man for the practice of piety and virtue, and for the enjoyment of everlaſting life: that our firſt parents, by wilfully tranſgreſſing a moſt equitable command of his, forfeited their title to immortality, diſordered the frame of their bodies and minds, and derived to us the ſame corrupt and mortal nature, to which they had reduced themſelves: that being in this condition through their fault, all men ſunk into a ſtill worſe, by committing many ſins, which, however prone to them, they might have had the means of avoiding; and thus have deſerved puniſhment here and hereafter: that wickedneſs prevailing early, and ſpreading wide in the world, firſt the practice, then the knowledge, both of true religion and moral virtue, were in a great meaſure loſt out of it: but that the unſpeakable mercy and wiſdom of the Supreme Being provided a remedy for theſe evils, intimated in general terms to the earlieſt offenders, promiſed more diſtinctly in the ſucceeding ages, and actually given *when the* proper *fulneſs of time came*†; which remedy was this. A perſon, made known under the character of the only-begotten Son of God, and one with the Father in a manner to us incomprehenſible, after teaching mankind from the beginning by various other methods, took upon him our nature, was born of a virgin, and dwelt on earth, to teach us perſonally by his word and example: condeſcended, for this compaſſionate purpoſe, to all the inconveniences of the preſent ſtate of things, to numberleſs indignities and ſufferings, and laſtly, to have his life taken away by the hands of wicked men; *humbling himſelf unto death, even*

* Heb. v. 9. † Gal. iv. 4.

*even the death of the croſs**, uſually inflicted on none but the vileſt and loweſt of malefactors. In conſideration of this meritorious goodneſs of his, which he engaged, before the world began thus to manifeſt, the Moſt High eſtabliſhed with him a covenant of grace and favour, by which *all power in heaven and earth was given him*†; and proviſion was made, that whoever ſhould ſincerely repent of the ſins which he had committed, and throw himſelf on the promiſed mercy of God; whether as more obſcurely notified before the Redeemer's incarnation, or more clearly afterwards; taking the word of truth for the law of his life, and faithfully endeavouring to obey it, ſhould not only have pardon for his paſt tranſgreſſions, however heinous, but the aſſiſtance of the divine ſpirit to preſerve him from future ones: that a kind providence ſhould turn every thing to his good, which befell him in this world, and endleſs felicity be his portion in the next. But then it was alſo denounced, that whoever ſhould either ſlight theſe offers when duly made; or, profeſſing to accept them, live unſuitably to them, Chriſt ſhould be of no benefit to ſuch; they ſhould remain in their ſins, with this heavy aggravation of their guilt, that they had rejected the counſel of God for their ſalvation; and when *light was come into the world, loved darkneſs rather than light, becauſe their deeds were evil*‡.

This is, in brief, the doctrine of Chriſt crucified. The main parts of it, you ſee, are two: God's goodneſs to us, and our duty to him: and if either be omitted, men are not *taught as the truth is in Jeſus*§. Inſiſting on moral duties only, is overlooking the greateſt of all duties, piety. Inſiſting on the duties of natural religion only, is injuriouſly deſpiſing thoſe of revelation, which the ſame authority hath enjoined. And laying before men all the commandments of God, only omitting to ſay, how they ſhall be enabled to perform them, and how they ſhall procure their performances, faulty as the beſt of them are, to be accepted, is failing them in points of the moſt abſolute neceſſity.

But then, on the other hand, ſpeaking of nothing, but Chriſt and his grace, is concealing what *the grace of God appeared unto all men to teach them; that denying ungodlineſs and worldly luſts, they ſhould live ſoberly, righteouſly and godly in this*

* Phil. ii. 8. † Matth. xxviii. 18.
‡ John. iii. 19. § Eph. iv. 21.

*this preſent world**. It is not therefore naming Chriſt ever ſo often, or exalting his compaſſion to the fallen race of *Adam* ever ſo much, or deſcribing his dreadful ſufferings ever ſo movingly, that is, preaching him as we ought, if all be not directed to make us become like him. His own ſermon on the mount is almoſt entirely filled with precepts of duty; of the common duties of common life. And ſo may other ſermons too, yet be truly chriſtian, even without mentioning Chriſt expreſly, provided the neceſſity of his aid and his merits be underſtood throughout them; and the great deſign of his coming, the reformation of the hearts and lives of men, be cloſely purſued in them. Thus then judge of our diſcourſes: and, which is of more importance, thus judge of your own improvement. It is neither talking nor thinking highly of Chriſt, nor being affected in the tendereſt manner with his bitter paſſion and dying love, that conſtitutes a believer in him, ſuch as he will finally own: but *herein* may *we have boldneſs in the day of judgement*, if, *as he was, ſo are we in this world*†.

Yet ſtill the ſacrifice of him *as a lamb without blemiſh*‡, for our ſins, the need we had of it, and the benefits we receive from it, are ſuch capital and indiſpenſible articles, that every preacher, who doth not frequently return to them, is without excuſe: and every profeſſor of chriſtianity, who doth not *live by the faith of the ſon of God, who loved him, and gave himſelf for him, fruſtrates his grace*§, and will *come ſhort of his glory*‖. Accordingly, though St. *Paul* himſelf hath conſiderable parts of chapters, in which little, if any thing, is ſaid of our Saviour: yet all prepares the way for introducing him again; all points our eye to him; all makes parts of that building, *the corner ſtone* of which *is Jeſus Chriſt*¶.

Having thus explained, what *preaching Chriſt crucified* is, I proceed to ſhew,

II. Why this doctrine was *to the Jews a ſtumbling-block, and to the Greeks fooliſhneſs*; which the words of the text, when unfolded, will tell us plainly. *The Jews require a ſign, and the Greeks ſeek after wiſdom.*

The former had been delivered from the bondage of *Egypt by ſigns and wonders, by a mighty hand and a ſtretched out arm***. A glorious appearance of God upon mount *Sinai* had

 accompanied

* Tit. ii. 11, 12. † 1 John iv. 17. ‡ 1 Pet. ii 19.
§ Gal. ii. 20, 21. ‖ Rom. iii. 23. ¶ Eph. ii. 20.
** Deut. iv. 34. v. 15.

accompanied the promulgation of their law: his viſible preſence had dwelt with them, firſt in the tabernacle, then in the temple: his miraculous interpoſitions had given, preſerved, and reſtored to them the land of *Canaan*, with much earthly proſperity. Theſe bleſſings had ſo powerfully ſtruck the imaginations of a groſs and carnal people, that they paid in general but little attention to any that were not of a temporal nature. And therefore, whenever their prophets foretold the coming of the promiſed Redeemer, they were obliged, unleſs they would have their predictions deſpiſed and forgotten, to deſcribe him in terms, literally denoting worldly grandeur: *as ruling in the midſt of his enemies, judging among the heathen**, and *higher than the kings of the earth*†. They did however join to theſe deſcriptions ſuch circumſtances, as ſufficiently determined their words to a ſpiritual meaning. But ſtill the other, being far more agreeable, was always uppermoſt in the thoughts of the *Jews*; and they would image to themſelves the expected ſon of *David*, as a mighty conqueror, who ſhould prove himſelf the true Meſſiah by ſupernatural aſſiſtances from above, enabling him to exert a more than human force againſt the nations, which held them in ſubjection, and extend the *Jewiſh* empire over the globe.

In this ſenſe it was, that they *required a ſign*‡. Other ſigns of his miſſion our Saviour had ſhewn without number: but ſtill they demand to *ſee a ſign from heaven*§. Every miracle is a ſign from heaven, had they conſidered rightly. But the ſign, on which their hearts were ſet, was that in the book of *Daniel*; when the *Son of man ſhould come with the clouds of heaven, and be brought near to the Ancient of Days; and have given to him dominion and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations and languages ſhould ſerve him*‖. Our Saviour obſerved their miſtake, and told them, that the ſign, which they deſired, ſhould indeed be *given*, but *not to that generation*; that the principal evidence, to be afforded them, was *the ſign of the prophet Jonas*¶: the reſurrection of *Jeſus* the third day from the

* Pſ. cx. 2, 6. † Pſ. lxxxix. $\frac{27}{28}$.

‡ And a ſign of this ſort they expected, even when the temple was burnt by the *Romans*. For that very day a falſe prophet aſſured the people, ως ο Θεος ἐνι τὸ ἱερὸν ἀναβαίνειν κελεύει, ἐ τὰ, μέλλοντα τὰ σημεῖα τῆς σωτηρίας. Joſeph. B. I. l. 6. c. 5. § 2. Ed. Haverc. In a few lines after, he ſtiles this, προσμονὴν τὴν ἀπὸ τῶ Θεῶ βοηθείας.

§ Matth. xvi. 1. Mark viii. 11. Luke xi. 16. ‖ Dan. vii. 13, 14.

¶ Matth. xii. 39.

the grave, as *Jonas* roſe from the depth of the ſea. To following ages farther ſigns were to be vouchſafed in their order: the dominion, which they expected to ſee eſtabliſhed at once, was deſigned to take place by degrees, over the ſouls and conſciences of men, not their bodies and fortunes merely: and in this nobleſt ſenſe, *the kingdoms of this world were to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Chriſt**. But at length the time will come for a yet more awful diſplay of his regal power, in the laſt judgement: and then ſhall they who were ſo prematurely impatient for a ſign from heaven, *ſee*, before they wiſh it, *the ſign of the Son of man coming in the clouds with power and great glory*†.

But ſuch repreſentations were likely to have little effect on ſuch minds. One, who ſhould *at that time reſtore again the kingdom to Iſrael*‡, was what the whole people wanted. And when they not only beheld the meanneſs of our Saviour's appearance, and heard the meekneſs of his doctrine, but ſaw how carefully he avoided the opportunities of obtaining an earthly kingdom, the leading part of the nation immediately denied him. But when he was arraigned and condemned, and ſuffered the death of a ſlave; then the faith, even of his apoſtles, almoſt died with him. *We truſted*, ſay two of his diſciples, as if now all hope was at an end, *we truſted, that it had been he which ſhould have redeemed Iſrael*§. It is true, they recovered themſelves: but the greater part of the *Jews* did not: and a crucified Redeemer continues *a ſtumbling-block* to them; or, in the words of *Simeon*, *a ſign ſpoken againſt, ſet for the fall and riſing again of many in Iſrael*‖: indeed for the utter fall of that church and nation, till the ſeaſon foretold ſhall come, for which providence hath left room, by the wonderful preſervation of this one and only people diſtinct from all others for ſo many ages, when by *looking on him whom they have pierced, and mourning*, they ſhall¶ riſe again and be as *life from the dead***.

As for the *Greeks*, or Gentiles, they did not object to the goſpel, that the authority of it wanted the proof of ſigns from heaven; but that the preaching of it wanted the recommendation of what they called *wiſdom*. Neither the manner of the apoſtles teaching was adorned with that plauſible oratory, of which

* Rev. xi. 15. † Matth. xiv. 30. ‡ Acts. i. 6.
§ Luke xxiv. 21. ‖ Luke ii. 34. ¶ Zech. xii. 19. John xix. 37.
** Rom. xi. 15.

which they were ſo fond; which ſoothed the ears, and entertained the imagination; which could make a bad cauſe victorious, and a good one ſuſpected: nor yet was the matter of their diſcourſe made up of curious ſpeculations, abſtruſe points in philoſophy debated with accuteneſs, theories, built upon ſlender foundations to great heights, then attacked with ſubtle objections, and defended with more ſubtle refinements. Theſe were the delights of the learned *Greeks*; who, as *St. Paul*, and indeed their own writers obſerve particularly of *the Athenians, ſpent their time in nothing elſe, but either to tell or to hear ſome new thing**. Immediately therefore, when he had begun to preach in that city, they apply to him with great eagerneſs: *may we know, what this new doctrine, whereof thou ſpeakeſt, is*†? But when they found no ſuch gratification of their fancy as they expected; but a grave reproof of their favourite ſuperſtitions, a ſerious call to repentance, a ſolemn denounciation of a future recompence; and the foundation of theſe diſagreeable doctrines laid in a mere fact, which was contrary to all their ſchemes and ſyſtems, that *God would judge the world in righteouſneſs by that man, whom he had ordained, whereof he had given aſſurance to all men, in that he had raiſed him from the dead; ſome*, we read, *mocked*; and of thoſe, who ſaid more civilly, that *they would hear him again of that matter*‡, we have no cauſe to believe, that many did. Nor would the principal *Romans* afford to our holy faith more attention. For when *St. Paul* was arguing before *Agrippa*, being a *Jew*, from the prophets that *Chriſt was to ſuffer and riſe again*; *Feſtus* the governor, inſtantly interrupted him: *Paul, thou art beſide thyſelf; much learning doth make thee mad*§.

This was the treatment, which man, *wiſe in their own conceits*‖, and bigotted to their own opinions, gave the goſpel of Chriſt. Its doctrines had nothing amuſing to minds full of trifling curioſity; its precepts had many things diſguſting to human ſenſuality and pride: its proofs were inconſiſtent with their prevailing notions. So it was rejected without examination by perſons, whom the irony of *Job* ſuits perfectly well: *no doubt, but ye are the people; and wiſdom ſhall die with you*¶. It ought to ſurpriſe no one, that this ſort of men, who have always

* Acts xvii. † Verſe 19. ‡ Acts xvii. 31, 32.
§ Acts xxvi. 23, 24. ‖ Rom. xii. 16. ¶ Job xii. 2.

always been too common in the world, and never more than now, ſhould ſcorn chriſtianity: while they continue ſuch as they are, they cannot embrace it.

But, God be thanked, there have ever been ſome of more equitable diſpoſitions: and to theſe it hath conſtantly appeared in that light, which the text expreſſes.

III. *But unto them, which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Chriſt the power of God and the wiſdom of God.* They who would ſuffer the voice of reaſon and revelation to call upon them, and would attend to the call, quickly diſcovered, under the meanneſs of Chriſt's appearance, divine power; and under the plainneſs of his doctrine, divine wiſdom.

The *Jews* had no cauſe to expect military exploits, miraculous victories, and outward ſplendor in their Meſſiah. Their own prophets had foretold, that he was to *come to them lowly and meek**; *to be deſpiſed and rejected of men, to pour out his ſoul unto death an offering for ſin, and make interceſſion for the tranſgreſſors*†. Of other ſorts of miracles they had many more performed by him and his diſciples, than by *Moſes* and the prophets. If his death, for want of knowing the ſcriptures, appeared an objection; his riſing again, and aſcenſion into heaven, was a full proof of his authority. If he brought them no deliverance from their temporal enemies; yet he freed them from infinitely more formidable ones, from ſin and guilt, and the wrath of God; and inſtead of a ſhort-lived tyranny over the nations of the earth, he obtained for them an eternal triumph over death and hell; and *made them kings and prieſts unto God, to reign with him for ever and ever*‡. Thus was he in much the moſt important ſenſe, *the power of God unto ſalvation*§: and his real greatneſs exceeded all that they looked for, unſpeakably more, than his viſible appearance fell beneath it.

As to the defect of that wiſdom, which the *Greeks* required in the goſpel: it had not indeed *the wiſdom of this world*, or of the vain *diſputers of this world*‖, who *profeſſing themſelves to be wiſe became fools*¶: but, void as it appears of argumentation and ornament, every ſingle truth, that can lead men to virtue and happineſs, is taught in it much more fully and convincingly, than in all the preceeding inſtitutions either of philoſophy or religion. The being, attributes and providence of

* Zech. ix. 9. Matth. xxi. 5. † Iſ. liii. ‡ Rev. i. 6. v. 10. xx. 6. xxii. 5.
§ Rom. i. 16. ‖ Cor. i. 20. ¶ Rom. i. 22.

of God, the apoſtles proved, were *clearly ſeen, being underſtood by the things that were made**: the nature and obligation of piety and morals, the forgiveneſs of ſins upon repentance, the inward aſſiſtance of divine grace, the future happineſs of the good, and puniſhment of the bad, theſe things they did not ingeniouſly harangue upon, after the beloved manner of the *Greeks*, and leave them in the ſame uncertainty in which they found them, but gave for their aſſertions concerning them, the irrefragable teſtimony of miracles which muſt proceed from the Almighty; and ſome of them ſuch as, in their opinion, even the Almighty was unable to perform. For that *God* himſelf *ſhould raiſe the dead, was thought a thing incredible with them*†. But as no juſt reaſoning can ſhew it to be impoſſible, it is more certainly his work for being beyond our comprehenſion. And this is that undeniable *demonſtration of the ſpirit and of power* which infinitely excells all *the enticing words of man's wiſdom*‡, not only in the ſtrength of its evidence, but the efficacy of its influence too. For after the deepeſt philoſophers, and moſt florid orators had wearied themſelves for ages in framing elaborate diſcourſes about religion and virtue, without being able to ſet up the true profeſſion of either, ſo much as in a ſingle village; the unlearned diſciples of Chriſt laid, in a few years, ſuch foundations of both throughout the world, as have ſupported them to this day, and ever will. *For the fooliſhneſs of God is wiſer than men, and the weakneſs of God is ſtronger than men*§.

Since therefore the whole of the goſpel is ſo firmly proved, and moſt parts of it ſo evidently rational, and no part of it evidently otherwiſe: be we ever ſo incapable of penetrating into the depths of ſome doctrines, and the reaſons of ſome proceedings, yet well may it become us to think, that he who ſees all things, may eaſily ſee many, which we do not; and to reverence *the wiſdom of God in a myſtery, even the hidden wiſdom which he ordained before the world, unto our glory*‖. Whether ſinners could be ſaved no other way, than by the death of his ſon: or why, if they could, he hath preferred that to the reſt; we have no right to aſk. What he hath choſen, we might be ſure is beſt, even did no reaſon at all for it appear. But he hath made known ſeveral to us: ſome clearly

* Rom. i. 20. † Acts xxxvi. 8. ‡ 1 Cor. ii. 4.
§ 1 Cor. i, 25. ‖ 1 Cor. ii, 7.

clearly, some *as through a glass darkly**; but the obscurest of them all to be contemplated with awful respect.

By his eternal Son, God made the world, and hath administered it from the beginning. He therefore was plainly the fit person to conduct the most important of all its affairs, the recovery of mankind from sin and misery; *that in all things*, as the apostle expresses it, *he might have the pre-eminence, and in him all fulness dwell*†. In order to recover and reform men, he must instruct them: and doing it himself was unquestionably the most efficacious method. But how must he come to do it? Had he appeared in a station of power and wealth; many would have been ready to pay court to him: but few, to obey his precepts from the heart. Even in his low estate, some followed him a while, merely for the loaves. And how much more hypocrisy, a very improper qualification for the kingdom of righteousness, would there have been amongst his hearers, had the circumstances of the teacher been more inviting! And how unsurmountable a disgrace might they have brought upon his whole undertaking in its very infancy, instead of the honour and support which it received from the unimpeached integrity of its first afflicted professors!

But further: Nothing enforces precepts, like example. Now what example could the Messias have set, in the midst of worldly pomp and grandeur? A very useful one certainly in some points to some of his chief officers, and others about his person: but removed from the sight, and unsuitable to the condition of the bulk of mankind: whereas in the sort of life, which he chose, an extremely public, though a mean one, he was a daily and familiar pattern to all men, of the most general and difficult virtues: of condescension, disinterestedness, and delight to do good; of indifference to worldly enjoyments, composedness under contempt, meekness under malicious provocations, and resignation to God's will under the bitterest sufferings of every kind. These things, most of us, in one part or another of our pilgrimage, have need to practise: and we find them so hard to learn, that the encouragement of his having done and borne much more than he requires of us, and the assurance, that *having been tempted* himself, he will *succour us when we are tempted*‡, will, in a time of trial, be blessings unspeakable.

* 1 Cor. xiii. 12. † See Col. i. 13—20. ‡ Heb. ii. 18.

Then conſider, beſides, how great a confirmation his humility and patience add to the other proofs of his authority. A claim to worldly power, by virtue of a divine commiſſion, raiſes apprehenſions of unfair deſign. But when a perſon, declaring himſelf to come from heaven, renounces every thing on earth, which men uſually hold dear; when he ſhews by plain facts, that his errand is, *not to be miniſtered unto, but to miniſter, and to lay down his life for his* followers*; when he foreſees and foretells, that his doctrine will bring him to the ſhamefulleſt and cruelleſt of deaths, and yet goes on, and meets it calmly: here is the ſtrongeſt evidence of ſincerity; and the moſt engaging motive to love him who hath ſo loved us, as to ſeal with his blood the truth of the good tidings, which he came to bring us.

But there is yet one reaſon more of our Saviour's paſſion, of which if we ſee not diſtinctly the full force, we ſee however, that it may be of infinite force. Mankind are ſinners. Our firſt parents were ſo: we have all been ſo, few of us think to what a degree: and cloſe upon ſin follow weakneſs and guilt. The good inſtructions and example of our bleſſed Lord have indeed, without any thing farther, a powerful tendency to reform us, if we have ſtrength to reform ourſelves, on ſeeing that we ought. But what can they do for us, if we have not; which experience too often proves to be our caſe? or ſuppoſing them to do it ever ſo effectually, ſtill it would be true, that we have been ſinners; have diſhonoured our Maker, and broken his laws: and who but himſelf can tell, what ſatisfaction the holineſs of his nature and the honour of his government may demand to be made for ſuch offences? mere ſorrow for having done amiſs very ſeldom frees us in this world from the ill conſequences of tranſgreſſion: and what ſecurity can we have, that it will in the next? living well for the future, is making no amends for having ſinned before: for it is no more than our duty, if we had never ſinned at all: beſides that what men call living well, eſpecially men deſtitute of the ſpirit of Chriſt, is mixed with innumerable and grievous faults. In this ſtate of things then, where is the certainty, that our ſins would or could be forgiven; or the authority of God kept up in the eyes of his creation otherwiſe, than by puniſhing the guilty; and if that was to be done, the whole race of mankind

* Matth. xx. 28.

mankind must fall under the sentence. Here it was therefore that his unsearchable wisdom interposed, who, alone knowing the fittest means of reconciling justice with goodness, pitched upon this: that as a terrifying monument of the ill desert of iniquity, his beloved Son should in our nature, and in our stead suffer death; and for an eternal demonstration of the divine benignity, his undergoing it voluntarily should be rewarded with the highest glory to himself; and with pardon, and grace, and life eternal to all who made their humble claim to them, by repentance, faith, and love. Thus did God shew himself *just, and the justifier of them which believe in Jesus**: thus did *mercy and truth meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other*†.

Assuredly so extraordinary a method would never have been taken without extraordinary need of it. That we should fully discern the need, is no way necessary: it suffices that God did. Our concern is no more than to accept salvation, his own gift, on his own terms: renouncing all merit in ourselves, laying hold, by a lively faith, on the merits of our Redeemer's obedience, thanking our heavenly Father from the bottom of our souls, for sending his blessed Son into the world, and esteeming most highly the christian creed, the christian worship, the christian sacrament. *God forbid*, then, *that we should glory* in any thing, *save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*‡: or ever be ashamed of that, for all the scorn and ridicule of a thoughtless and profane world. But God forbid also, that while we profess to believe on him, we should *crucify him to ourselves afresh, and put him* and his religion *to shame*§, by transgressing and neglecting any obligation of piety towards our Maker, our Saviour, our Sanctifier; of justice or goodness towards our fellow-creatures; of humility, sobriety, temperance, chastity, in the government of ourselves. For in vain do we *call him Lord*, unless we *do the things*‖ which he commands us: in vain do we trust in his sacrifice, unless we *present our* souls and *bodies, a sacrifice acceptable unto God*¶: in vain do we imagine our peace is made through him in heaven, unless on earth we *follow peace with all men, and* that universal *holiness* of life *without which no man shall see the Lord***.

* Rom. iii. 26. † Psal. lxxxv. 10. ‡ Gal. vi. 14.
§ Heb. vi. 6. ‖ Luke vi. 46. ¶ Rom. xii. 1.
** Heb. xii. 14.

SER.

SERMON L.

FAITH IN A FUTURE STATE, THE CHIEF CONSOLATION UNDER AFFLICTION.

1 COR. XV. 19.

If in this life only we have hope in Chriſt, we are of all men moſt miſerable.

IN the words preceeding theſe, the apoſtle, after ſetting forth, in ſeveral particulars, the evidence of our bleſſed Lord's reſurrection, goes on to prove from it the important doctrine of a general reſurrection to eternal life.

It may ſeem to us now very ſtrange, that any, who called themſelves chriſtians, could make the leaſt doubt of ſo known and eſſential an article of the chriſtian faith. But if we conſider the ſtate, in which the world was then, we ſhall wonder no longer, that, of profeſſed believers, there ſhould be ſome, who did not believe the dead would be raiſed again. Among the *Jews*, the Phariſees indeed were firmly perſuaded of this truth. But the Sadducees, a conſiderable ſect, though not for the numbers, yet for the rank of thoſe who embraced it, rejected the doctrine of a futuer life intirely: and looked on the reſurrection, as a thing peculiarly incredible. Notwithſtanding which, as they held a preſent providence that rules the world, they might many of them, reading the predictions of the Old Teſtament concerning the Meſſiah, ſeeing the accompliſhment of them in the perſon of *Jeſus*, and ſtruck with the miracles, which he and his followers performed, be perſuaded, on the whole, that he was ſent from God; and yet be very backward to underſtand what he taught, when he contradicted their former prejudices. But the heathens were ſtill more likely to act thus. For amongſt them, even the ſteadieſt believers of a future ſtate all diſbelieved the riſing again of the body, as a thing

a thing both impoſſible and unfit: for their men of learning thought it only the priſon of the ſoul; which muſt always be an impediment, inſtead of a help to it. Suppoſe then chriſtianity preached, with proper evidence, to ſuch perſons as theſe: they would receive very gladly what was ſaid of the remiſſion of ſins, the obligations to virtue, the future life of the ſoul, happy or miſerable, according to every one's deeds. But when the reſurrection of the body was taught, there muſt evidently be great danger, either that they would reject the whole of the goſpel, becauſe of this one ſeemingly incredible part; as the philoſophers at *Athens* did, who are mentioned in the *Acts*; or elſe, that they would ſo interpret this part, as to reconcile it with their preconceived opinion. Accordingly, the hiſtory of the church informs us, that ſeveral, in the firſt ages, thought our Saviour died and roſe again, not in reality, but in miraculous appearance only. And others had equally wild fancies in other articles of religion: as indeed it was very natural for them to entertain ſurpriſing imaginations, about matters ſo intirely new to them; eſpecially when, in all likelihood, great numbers were converted to the belief of chriſtianity in general, by ſeeing or being informed of the miracles wrought in its favour; who perhaps had no opportunity, for ſome time, of hearing the particular doctrines of it explained ſo diſtinctly, by thoſe who thoroughly underſtood them, as to be ſet right in every point. And this may poſſibly have been one chief reaſon of the many ſtrange notions, that we find ſome of the early chriſtians embraced.

Beſides, they might the more eaſily be miſtaken, in the caſe before us, on this account: that the apoſtles, imitating the language, already in uſe concerning the *Jewiſh* proſelytes, expreſſed the change, which chriſtianity made in the tempers and condition of men, by the phraſes of *dying to ſin, being buried with Chriſt in baptiſm, and riſing again to newneſs of life*. The ignorant or prejudiced might haſtily conclude from hence, that no other riſing again was intended to be taught: and that therefore *the reſurrection was paſt already*, as we are told by our apoſtle, ſome affirmed*.

Now this error, if it comprehended the denial of a future ſtate, ſubverted the main purpoſe of chriſtianity: which was, influencing the world to piety and virtue, from the expectation of

* 2 Tim. ii. 18.

of that ſtat*. And where only the future life of the body was denied; even that, by conſequence, made the goſpel *of no effect*. For if the reſurrection of it was a thing impoſſible, which all, who rejected it, ſeem to have held; then the reſurrection of Chriſt was a thing impoſſible. Yet this was the main fact, to which the apoſtles were appointed to bear witneſs, and lay the ſtreſs of their cauſe upon it. If therefore they erred here, they deſerved belief in nothing: their *preaching was vain, and the faith* of their followers *vain alſo*†. Or, ſuppoſing chriſtianity had ſtill ſufficient evidence left; yet in another ſenſe, it would be *vain*, that is, ineffectual to the forgiveneſs of our ſins; the very foundation of which is, that *he, who was delivered for our offences, roſe again for our juſtification*‡. If therefore he is not riſen, we are not juſtified: it appears not, that his death was more than that of a common man; he continues under the power of it, not able to help himſelf, much leſs others; and human kind remains, as it was before, liable to future puniſhment, and uncertain of future reward. This is the apoſtle's reaſoning, juſt before the text; *If the dead riſe not, then is not Chriſt raiſed: and if Chriſt be not raiſed, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your ſins*§. He goes on: *then they alſo, which are fallen aſleep in Chriſt, are periſhed*‖. Neither dying in the chriſtian faith, nor dying for it, can do them good with reſpect to a future life. And *if in this life only we have hope in Chriſt*, as very probably ſome of the Sadducee converts might think, *we are of all men moſt miſerable*: or, as the original word ſtrictly ſignifies, *moſt pitiable*.

Now, of what perſons this is ſaid, and on what account it is true of them, a great doubt hath been raiſed.

Some have gone ſo far, as to affirm, that, in the preſent world, brutes are happier then men, and bad men than good. But of the former of theſe points, at leaſt, plainly, the apoſtle ſaith nothing. Others underſtand him to mean, that the condition of moral heathens in this life is better than that of chriſtians, becauſe of the difficult duties, and ſevere reſtraints, which are peculiar to the latter. But evidently he doth not ſay at all,

* Origen, Com. in Matth. xxii. 23. tom. 17. p. 811. inſiſts, that the apoſtle writes here againſt perſons diſbelieving a future life; and that his arguments are not concluſive againſt thoſe who diſbelieve a reſurrection only. I have endeavoured to ſhew the contrary in what follows,

† Cor. xvi. 14. ‡ Rom. iv. 25. § 1 Cor. xv. 16, 17. ‖ Verſe 18.

all, what the condition of any perſons actually is: but only what it would be, if they had not the hope of hereafter to ſupport them. And therefore, with that hope, good men, and good chriſtians, may, even at preſent, be happier than others; though it were true, that, without it, they would be more miſerable. Not that he meant to affirm, that they would be more miſerable, were the proſpect of a better ſtate out of the queſtion. Far from it.

Read but the deſcription, which he gives of the vicious part of the heathen world, in the beginning of his epiſtle to the *Romans*; where he tells us, *God had given them over to a reprobate mind, to do thoſe things, which are not convenient; being filled with all unrighteouſneſs, fornication, wickedneſs, covetouſneſs maliciouſneſs, envy, murder, ſtrife, deceit, malignity; without underſtanding, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful**. Could he poſſibly think this a happy ſtate? He appeals to their own experience for the contrary: *what fruit had ye then in thoſe things, whereof ye are now aſhamed*†? heathen vices then he did not think at all conducive to the enjoyment of life: nor doth he ever intimate, that heathen virtues, were more ſo, than chriſtian graces. So far as they are both the ſame, they muſt have the ſame effects: and there are few caſes, if any, in which the goſpel, rightly underſtood, is more ſtrict than reaſon, duly cultivated: beſides that thoſe precepts of it, which are the ſtricteſt of all, perhaps contribute the moſt of all to our happineſs here; by ſtriking at the root, from whence our faults and uneaſineſſes ſpring, and requiring of us that inward ſelf-government which is the only means of true ſelf-enjoyment. There is alſo another exceeding great advantage of chriſtian virtue; that the goſpel affords ſuch peculiar evidences and means of God's grace and aſſiſtance, in proportion as we need it, to do every thing, to which he calls us; that though we were not to add the conſideration of his rewarding us hereafter, yet believers would undoubtedly be capable of going through the ſame difficulties with much greater ſpirit, comfort and ſucceſs, than other men. And accordingly our Saviour aſſures us that *his yoke is eaſy, and his burthen light*‡. And St. *Paul* yet more diſtinctly aſſerts, that *godlineſs*, meaning certainly chriſtian godlineſs,

* Rom. i. 28—31. † Rom. vi. 21. ‡ Matth xi. 30.

godlineſs, is profitable unto all things, having promiſe of the life that now is, as well as *that which is to come**.

But of whom can it be then, that he ſpeaks, when he ſaith ſo expreſsly, *If in this life only we have hope in Chriſt, we are of all men moſt miſerable?* I anſwer, of the very ſame, whom he denoted, by the word *We*, the laſt time he uſed it, but a few lines before: of the witneſſes of Chriſt's reſurrection, and the preachers of his goſpel; who then ſuffered many afflictions on account of it in this life; and were wretched indeed, if they had no proſpect of being the better for it in another: as were certainly in proportion alſo their firſt followers. For in that age, *all that lived godly in Chriſt Jeſus ſuffered perſecution*†; and *knew*, as the apoſtle elſwhere reminds them, that *they were appointed thereunto*‡.

Not thoſe duties therefore, which always belonged to the chriſtian profeſſion, but thoſe ſufferings, which then attended it, were the reaſon, that, had not the hopes of a better life through Chriſt ſupported them, they had been *the moſt miſerable of all men*. And this appears more plainly yet from the ſequel of the diſcourſe; where, reſuming this part of the ſubject again, he doth not argue, *If the dead riſe not*, why do we live ſoberly and righteouſly; as he doubtleſs ought to have done, if ſobriety and righteouſneſs were prejudicial in this world; but, *if the dead riſe not, why ſtand we in jeopardy every hour*§? *What advantageth it me, that I have fought with beaſts at Epheſus, if the dead riſe not*‖?

He doth indeed, after this, immediately ſubjoin, *let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die*. But theſe words, in the paſſage of *Iſaiah*¶, from whence they are taken, ſtand in oppoſition, not to temperance, but to mortification and faſting. And here they do not mean, let us indulge debauchery and exceſs: but, let us not deprive ourſelves, if we can hope for no future advantage from it, of the innocent ſatisfactions and comforts of life, while it laſts. The expreſſion may indeed ſometimes be uſed in a bad ſenſe: but it is moſt frequently uſed in a good one; as, to mention no more, where our Saviour ſaith of himſelf, that *he came eating and drinking***? and where St. *Paul* pleads, *have we not power to eat and to drink*††? His intention therefore

* 1 Tim. iv. 8. † 2 Tim. iii. 12. ‡ 1 Theſſ. iii. 3.
§ 1 Cor. xv. 30. ‖ Verſe 32. ¶ Iſ. xxii. 13.
** Matth. xi. 19. †† 1 Cor. ix. 4.

therefore was only to ſay: if there be no reſurrection, if Chriſt be not riſen, if his religion can be of no ſervice to us hereafter, let us not make ourſelves miſerable for the ſake of it here: let us not ſpend our lives, as he elſwhere declares he did his, for the ſervice of the goſpel, *in wearineſs and painfulneſs, in hunger and thirſt, in cold and nakedneſs**; but renouncing what only brings on us fruitleſs ſufferings, enjoy our eaſe like other wiſe men. Theſe conſequences he knew would ſtartle thoſe, whom he preſſed with them; and ſhew them the neceſſity, either of abandoning their faith entirely, which he was certain they would not, or of admitting the reſurrection for one article of it.

Upon the whole then it appears, that the perſecutions, not the duties of chriſtianity, were what would have made the believers in it miſerable, had the hope, which it gave them, been confined to this life. And indeed, though poſſibly God might have appointed, that doing our duty ſhould be attended of neceſſity with greater uneaſineſs and leſs pleaſure here, than tranſgreſſing it: yet ſuch a conſtitution of things would have made his moral perfections, and his providence, much more doubtful; for preſent appearances would then have been altogether againſt them: and this would greatly have diſcouraged the practice of virtue; amongſt all men indeed, but eſpecially in thoſe many ages and countries, which had no clear knowledge, whatever glimmerings they might have, of a future ſtate.

It is true, ſome excellent perſons have imagined, that the fewer advantages they allowed to virtue here in their pious diſcourſes and writings, the more fully they ſhould prove it muſt be rewarded hereafter: and therefore have ſtrenuouſly pleaded for the preſent happineſs of vice. But we ought not to ſtate things otherwiſe than they are, in order to draw uſeful concluſions: and no good will come of it. Being perſuaded, that wickedneſs is happier at preſent, may incline as many to think God is not diſpleaſed with it; as any reaſonings from his attributes will incline to think he is. For, if the ſtate of things be contrived by his providence to favour bad men more than good now; this may well raiſe a doubt, whether the ſame providence will ſo certainly do juſt the contrary in the next world. And a very ſmall hope of eſcaping puniſhment there

* 2 Cor. xi.

will effectually determine men to live as they ought not, if it be acknowledged their intereſt here. Or ſuppoſing it ever ſo plain, that if virtue, on the whole, ſuffer in this life, it muſt be rewarded in another; yet what we call virtue in ourſelves will be far from intitling us to ſuch reward. And ſuppoſing any creature faultleſsly obedient, the juſtice of God will be bound to beſtow on it no greater and no longer reward, than will barely make amends for its ſufferings. And if we argue from his goodneſs; his doing ever ſo much for it on earth, will be no manner of objection againſt his doing ſtill more in heaven. For that will be only carrying on a ſcheme, which he hath already begun, and therefore, we may juſtly preſume, he will compleat. If a moral and religious behaviour be according to the natural courſe of things in this world, beneficial to men, and a wicked and impious one hurtful; as I hope you have often heard them proved to be: then we have clear evidence of fact, that God, who hath made them ſo, doth actually reward the one and puniſh the other. And though at preſent his recompences are neither exactly proportioned, nor without exception conſtant: yet, as we ſee many reaſons, that may juſtly occaſion this, and cannot but acknowledge there may be many more; there ariſes, from the whole, great foundation for hope, that the plain diſtinction, which he hath made already, will be yet more perfectly made in a proper time. So that there is no need for us to apprehend we muſt neceſſarily be miſerable here, in order to be happy hereafter; or to lie under the imputation of depreciating virtue, and making it good for nothing to its votaries, in this world, in order to ſecure it a retribution in the next. Reaſon doth not direct to that method: Revelation hath not taken it; and the teachers and profeſſors of chriſtianity ſhould avoid expoſing themſelves to a charge, from which chriſtianity itſelf is perfectly free.

But ſtill, were we to ſpeak of virtue, as always its own reward here, and attaining its end ſufficiently in the compaſs of this narrow life; that would be an extreme on the other hand, and a very pernicious one; whatever great names have countenanced it, ſome with good deſigns, and ſome with bad. Such extravagant praiſes of moral beauty and excellency will ſeldom have any other effect, where they have moſt, than raiſing an enthuſiaſm for it, that will be little more than notional, or an affectation

affectation of it, that will be nothing more than talk. And with the cooler part of mankind, attempting to perſuade them of the contrary to what, in many caſes, they ſee and feel, is loſing all credit; and making every thing that is ſaid to the advantage of right conduct ſuſpicious, by inſiſting on more, than can poſſibly be true.

The real ſtate of the caſe is plainly this. A temper and behaviour of piety, juſtice, benevolence, and rational ſelf-government, is fitted in its nature to make our lives here as happy, as we can make them. And therefore, though we had no farther proſpect, our preſent intereſt would, generally ſpeaking, conſiſt in theſe things: and would always conſiſt in them, if no particular circumſtances happened, to make exceptions. But the misfortune is, that ſuch circumſtances do frequently happen. Some men have, from their very conſtitution, peculiarly ſtrong propenſities to ſin, which give them long and painful exerciſe; and, after all, can barely be kept under, not rooted out, let them do what they will. Is this a ſtate of enjoyment, and its own reward? Or a ſtate of warfare, that requires a future recompence, proportionable to the ſufferings of it, to make it eligible? but others are yet more unhappy. They have added evil habits to evil inclinations: and, if they will amend their ways, muſt feel deep remorſe for what they have done amiſs already; and go through infinite difficulties to do right for the time to come, in contradiction to all their bad cuſtoms, their inflamed paſſions, their vicious friends: muſt bear great reproach, perhaps undergo much loſs, in making reparation for the injuries they have committed: when the whole of this might poſſibly have been avoided, by perſiſting in their former courſe. And, it may be, after all, they have a proſpect at moſt, barely of living long enough to accompliſh the change, but not to enjoy it. Who is there now, that can well be more *miſerable*, than ſuch a man's reſolution of amendment makes him, *if in this life only he hath hope?* Here then is a plain caſe, in which the belief of a future ſtate is able to defend the cauſe of virtue, and every thing elſe unable. But that, already mentioned, of perſecution, is a plainer ſtill. When men are to ſuffer ſhame and infamy, penalties and impriſonments, pains and tortures, for the ſake of true religion, as multitudes have done; or of moral honeſty, as has been

been the caſe of too many: what is there in the fulleſt conſciouſneſs of doing their duty, ſufficient to compenſate for theſe things, to ſouls of any common make, if ſuch conſciouſneſs alone be all the comfort they are to have, and even that very ſoon, perhaps inſtantly, to die with them? Undoubtedly the ſenſe of acting as we ought is a powerful ſupport. But, in caſes of extremity, it is mocking the miſeries of the good, to propoſe that ſingle remedy, as enough for them. And though it may happen but ſeldom, that they *ſuffer* a great deal *for righteouſneſs ſake**; yet they very often ſuffer more or leſs for it. And whoever doth not ſee, how happy it is in every inſtance of this ſort, and how neceſſary in moſt, that the encouragements of futurity ſhould come in to the aſſiſtance of the preſent motives to do well: hath either very little attention to the weakneſs of human minds; or very little concern to have virtue practiſed, how vehemently ſoever he may plead for its being applauded.

I will not enlarge on a farther conſideration, though an exceedingly material one, that the ſufferings, which mankind in general have to go through, are ſo frequent and ſo heavy, that there is much need of a better proſpect to alleviate them; and though the pious and virtuous were never to be the *moſt miſerable of all men*, yet *all men*, in one part or another of their days, would be *miſerable* more than enough, *if they had hope in this life only*.

The expectation of future bleſſedneſs, therefore, even when it was more doubtful, was *a light ſhining in a dark place*†, to cheer the fainting hearts, and direct the wandering ſteps of the children of men. Yet ſtill to have happineſs in their view, with ſuch uncertainty, as former ages were in, whether it could be attained or not, muſt unqueſtionably mix great anxiety with their expectations; and leave their circumſtances, on the whole, very pitiable. But God, in his mercy, hath removed all doubts from us; not only by expreſs promiſes, but an experimental proof alſo, of a reſurrection to life everlaſting, in the perſon of our bleſſed Lord: that through him we *might have the ſtrongeſt conſolation, when we fly for refuge to lay hold on the hope ſet before us; which hope we have as an anchor of the ſoul, ſure*

* 1 Pet. iii. 14. † 2 Pet. i. 19.

*ſure and ſtedfaſt, and which entereth within the veil; whither alſo the forerunner is already entered for us, even Jeſus**.

You cannot but ſee then, of what great conſequence it is for all wiſe men to encourage this faith, and all good men to have frequent recourſe to it. For the principal reaſon, why we are ſo faulty and ſo wretched in this life is, that we attend ſo little to the rewards of another. We ourſelves perhaps do not ſuſpect, how little it is. Would God that every one who hears me, would make a diligent examination, what ſhare of his deſires, his hopes, and his fears, the unſeen world takes up; and ſeriouſly aſk himſelf, whether it can poſſibly be fit, that the infinitely moſt important part of his condition ſhould be allowed ſo very much the leaſt part of his thoughts.

But then to think of our condition to good effect; we muſt be ſure, not to ſet our minds more on the privileges, than the duties of it; but remember, that as the virtuous would ſometimes be the moſt miſerable of men, if there were no expectation of futurity; ſo the vicious muſt be always the moſt miſerable, if there be any. Every promiſe of the goſpel is a threatning to them; and the doctrine of ſalvation will only condemn them to ſeverer puniſhments. Let *every man therefore, who hath hope in Chriſt, purify himſelf, even as he is pure*†. And let every man, who deſires to do ſo, remember, that he can do it only, by a ſtedfaſt belief, that Chriſt died and roſe again on our account; *for this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith*‡: by an humble dependence on grace from above, to be obtained by our prayers; *for we are not ſufficient of ourſelves to do any thing*§: and by a dilgent and conſtant uſe of that grace, in labouring to perform every part of our duty; for we are to *work out our own ſalvation, becauſe God worketh in us, both to will and to do*‖.

* Heb. vi. 18—20. † 1 John iii. 3. ‡ 1 John v. 4.
§ 2 Cor. iii. 15. ‖ Phil. ii. 12, 13.

SER.

SERMON LI.

Of the Sin against the Holy Ghost, and the Danger of rashly applying it to ourselves or others.

MATTH. xii. 31, 32.

Wherefore I say unto you; All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.

And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world neither in the world to come.

THESE words of our blessed Lord seldom, if ever, fail to excite a peculiar attention and alarm in the minds of all, who read or hear them; and the doctrine, which they contain, appears to some, either so difficult to be understood, or so improper to be admitted; and fills others with such terrors, or sinks them into such despondency; that, for the sake of great numbers, it should be well explained from time to time. And men ought to have the nature of this crime laid before them, when they are not disturbed within by the imagination of having committed it. For when they are, the agitation of their minds too commonly disqualifies them from judging rightly concerning either the sense of the text, or even their own actions.

Now there are several sins against the Holy Ghost, mentioned in scripture; *lying to**, *resisting*†, *tempting*‡, *grieving*§, *quenching*, *the spirit*‖: yet none of these is ever said to be unpardonable; and therefore, we may be sure, none of them is so: because, if it had, undoubtedly the word of God would have

* Acts v. 3. † Acts vii. 51. ‡ Acts v. 9. § Eph. iv. 30. ‖ 1 Thess. v. 19.

have given us that warning in relation to it: whereas on the contrary, the text itſelf, in the plaineſt words, aſſures us that every ſin is pardonable, excepting one, which is different from all theſe. If then either the wicked, reflecting on their guilt, or the innocent, overcome with groundleſs fears, are apprehenſive, that they have committed the ſin againſt the Holy Ghoſt, as they uſually call it, and therefore cannot be forgiven: they ſhould, in the firſt place, be aſked, or aſk themſelves, and anſwer diſtinctly, what ſin againſt the Holy Ghoſt they have committed? What the particular thing is, that weighs ſo heavy upon them? For unleſs it be preciſely *blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt*, there is no pretence for ſaying, they cannot be forgiven. There are but three paſſages in the bible, that mention this matter: the text: Mark iii. 28, 29. and Luke xii. 10: in every one of which, the very ſame word, *blaſphemy*, is uſed; and no other. So that, of whatever ſin elſe againſt the Divine Spirit they may have been guilty, if they have not been guilty of that, they may undoubtedly be forgiven. And this ſingle obſervation, duly attended to, is ſufficient to preſerve, or even reſtore, the quiet of multitudes. But ſtill too many, for want of underſtanding the nature of the blaſphemy which our bleſſed Lord here means, may falſely conceive themſelves to be chargeable with it: whilſt others, of a different turn, may wonder, or be much offended, at finding ſo terrible a denunciation againſt it: and a third ſort, if they perceive no danger of actually incurring this condemnation, may by no means conſider, ſo ſeriouſly as they ought, how near it they may come. I ſhall therefore endeavour to ſhew,

I. What the blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt, mentioned by our Saviour, is,

II. What is intended by his declaration, that *it ſhall not be forgiven, neither in this world nor that to come.*

III. Why he paſſes ſo heavy a ſentence on this one ſin.

IV. What things do, or do not, approach towards it.

I. What the blaſphemy againſt the Ghoſt, mentioned by our Saviour is.

Now the term *blaſphemy*, in the original language of the New Teſtament, whence we have derived it into our own, ſignifies nothing elſe, than ſpeaking evil of any one unjuſtly. And it is frequently uſed to denote ſpeaking evil of our equals; but more peculiarly, of our ſuperiors; and therefore, moſt eminently,

nently, of God the Father Almighty, his Son and Spirit: to which three alone this expreſſion is confined in our vulgar tongue. Blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt, therefore is ſpeaking irreverently and injuriouſly of the Holy Ghoſt: which may be done, by vilifying either his perſon, or his works. But of the former our Saviour doth not ſpeak: for nothing had happened, which could lead him to it. The *Jews*, whom he was reproving, profeſſed, and had the higheſt veneration for the Spirit of God: therefore they had certainly uttered no perſonal reproaches againſt him: indeed it doth not appear, that they had named him in what gave riſe to the declaration, made in the text. But the caſe, to lay it before you in the words of the goſpel, was this. *There was brought to him one poſſeſſed with a devil, blind and dumb; and he healed him; and all the people were amazed, and ſaid, is not this the ſon of David? But when the Phariſees heard it, they ſaid, this fellow doth not caſt out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.* It follows, *and Jeſus knew their thoughts**. Upon which he argued with them, that deſtroying the works of the devil, his influence over the bodies and ſouls of men, could not proceed from the devil himſelf, for that would be overturning his own kingdom; but evidently ſhewed a power oppoſite and ſuperior to his: and then he ſubjoined the words now under conſideration: which many learned interpreters have underſtood thus: that ſuch, as were ignorantly led by common prejudice to ſpeak againſt Chriſt, appearing only as a ſon of man; and, taking him for a mere man, reproached him with *being the carpenter's ſon*†, or even *gluttonous and a wine-bibber, and a friend of publicans and ſinners*‡; might, notwithſtanding, come to ſee their miſtake, and be forgiven: but when he performed miracles, before their eyes, to rectify their opinion, as he had juſt done then; if they reviled theſe alſo, aſcribing them to the agency of the devil, contrary to all reaſon, and perhaps to their own conſciences too; (for thus ſome underſtand the obſervation, that *Jeſus knew their thoughts*;) this was *adding ſin to ſin*§; was an effect imputing wickedneſs to the holy ſpirit of God, by repreſenting what was plainly done by him, as done by an evil being; and ſhould not be pardoned. Nor can it be denied

* Matth. xii. 22—25.
† Matth. xxxii. 55.
‡ Matth. vi. 19. Luke vii. 34.
§ Iſ. xxx. 1.

denied; but this interpretation ſeems to be much confirmed by St. *Mark*, who obſerves, that our Saviour gave them this warning, *becauſe they ſaid, he had an unclean ſpirit**.

But ſtill other eminent men, though they allow, that he *caſt out devils*, as himſelf expreſly affirms†, and performed the reſt of his wonderful works, *by the Spirit of God*, which is the ſame with the Holy Ghoſt; yet remark very truly, that this phraſe, *the Holy Ghoſt*, theſe words thus joined, in the goſpels and acts never ſignify the power of working miracles, but often ſignify the ſpiritual gifts, of ſpeaking with tongues and the like, which the apoſtles received: and that accordingly, though they had long before done many miracles, as well as their maſter, we are told notwithſtanding in the New Teſtament, that *the Holy Ghoſt was not yet given*‡; but promiſed, after our bleſſed Lord's aſcenſion. From hence then they argue, that conformably to this manner of ſpeaking, *blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt* muſt mean vilifying, not the miraculous operations, of which the Spirit was the author then; but the farther manifeſtations of himſelf, which were ſoon to follow them; and our Saviour muſt deſign in the text to inform his oppoſers, that all they had ſaid, and all they ſhould ſay of him, while he remained on earth, as a *deceiver of the people*§ and even one that *had a devil*‖, might be forgiven them: but if, when he was gone to the Father; and the *comforter*, or advocate, for ſo it ſhould be tranſlated, *come*¶, by ſupernatural gifts to *convince the world of ſin, becauſe they had not believed on him***: if they ſhould go on then to ſpeak evil of theſe alſo, their guilt ſhould never be remitted. And, in confirmation of this expoſition, they obſerve further, that Chriſt, at his death, prayed the *Father to forgive*†† his crucifiers, though at the ſame time they reviled and derided both him and his miracles; *he ſaved others, himſelf he cannot ſave; let Chriſt the king of Iſrael deſcend now from the croſs, and we will believe him*‡‡: and that, ſuitably to his maſter's example, St. *Peter* intreated them afterwards to *repent and be converted, that their ſins might be blotted out*§§, which therefore was yet poſſible: but when, they ſtill reſiſted the Holy Ghoſt, after theſe fuller

* Mark iii. 30. † Matth. xii. 28. ‡ John vii. 39.
§ John xii. 12. ‖ Matth. xi. 18. Luke vii. 33. ¶ John xv. 26.
** John xvi. 8, 9. †† Luke xxiii. 34. ‡‡ Matth. xxvii. 42. Mark xv. 32.
§§ Acts iii. 19.

proofs of his interpoſition, *contradicting and blaſpheming*: then the apoſtles *turned* from them, as *unworthy of everlaſting life*, and went *to the Gentiles**.

This later interpretation, I confeſs, appears to me the more probable. But, in this they agree: that the blaſphemy, which is pronounced unpardonable, was not ſpeaking evil of the perſon of the Holy Ghoſt, but of the miraculous powers which he exerted: and the difference is only, what miraculous powers are meant; whether thoſe mighty works, which our Saviour performed by means of the Divine Spirit, while on earth; or thoſe gifts, which were poured forth on men, after he aſcended to heaven: a queſtion, eaſy, no doubt, to be anſwered then; but of no importance to us now.

What we are concerned to remark farther is, that our bleſſed Lord's denunciation was pointed, not againſt ſuch blaſphemy or evil-ſpeaking, as mere miſtake or inconſiderateneſs might lead men into; but ſuch, as proceeded from wilful and deliberate wickedneſs: for with this he charges the *Jews*, immediately after the text: *O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, ſpeak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth ſpeaketh*†. Nor doth he paſs ſo dreadful a ſentence on the uſe of opprobrious language, concerning operations of the Spirit, manifeſted in diſtant places or times; but concerning miracles performed, or ſupernatural gifts exerciſed, before mens own eyes; for that advantage they, to whom he ſpoke, enjoyed. Nor did even they fall under this condemnation for every haſty expreſſion of contempt; but for ſuch, as they continued to utter, after a ſufficient time allowed them to grow cool and ſerious, and reflect. For when, upon the apoſtles receiving the gift of tongues, there were ſome, that *mocking ſaid, theſe men are full of new wine*‡: though it was certainly a blaſpheming ſaying in itſelf, and came from a wrong diſpoſition of mind, and reflected on a work of the Holy Ghoſt done in their own preſence; yet being only a ſudden flight, St. *Peter* did not impute it as blaſphemy to them, but merely as raſhneſs of judgment; and therefore applied himſelf to convince them of their miſtake, with ſo good effect, that 3000 were converted that very day. On the whole, therefore, the only perſons, whom we have ground to think guilty of *the blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt*, meant in the text, are they, who from bad motives, and,

* Acts xiii. 45, 46. † Matth. xii. 34. ‡ Acts ii. 13.

and, as we ſay, in cold blood, revile and rail againſt ſuch operations of the Divine Spirit, as are performed in their own preſence. Let us now inquire,

II. What is the true ſenſe of our Saviour's declaration, that this one ſin *ſhall not be forgiven, neither in this preſent world, nor that to come.*

Some have apprehended him to mean only, that all paſſionate and injurious language on common occaſions ſhall be conſidered as mere human infirmity, that doth not put men out of a ſtate of ſalvation; whereas the like language concerning the miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghoſt doth: brings them into a condition of ſpiritual death here, which, unleſs they riſe again from it by a particular repentance, will be followed by eternal death hereafter. But ſurely it is taking much too great liberty; firſt, by *all manner of ſin and blaſphemy* to underſtand only all ſinful evil-ſpeaking about common matters, though our Saviour hath ſpecified ſpeaking againſt himſelf: then to ſay, that all evil-ſpeaking about common matters is conſiſtent with ſalvation; and laſtly, when the text affirms peremptorily, that *the blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt*, and that alone, *ſhall not be forgiven*; to add, unleſs men particularly repent of it: a limitation, for which there is not the leaſt authority, and which would bring down this ſin to juſt the ſame level with many more. Some again think the words of our bleſſed Lord, though expreſſed abſolutely, are meant only in compariſon; that all other ſins will be forgiven ſooner; and this with the moſt difficulty of any. But, though doubtleſs there are ſome inſtances, eſpecially in the Old Teſtament, where what is ſaid poſitively muſt be underſtood comparatively: yet, I think none will be found of that ſort, where the aſſertion is made with ſuch great and calm ſolemnity, and ſo circumſtantially. Laſtly, not a few, obſerving that in all writers, the moſt general denunciations often admit no ſmall number of particular exceptions, conceive, that this before us may*. But then ſome foundation muſt always appear for ſuch exceptions, either in other paſſages of the ſame or other writers, concerning the ſame matter, or in the nature of the

 thing:

* *Eraſmus* in his paraphraſe interprets it, *vix inveniet veniam.* And *Latimer* in *Strype's* memorials, vol. 2. p. 70. ſaith, this ſin is called unforgiveable, becauſe ſeldom forgiven: but on repentance it may.

thing: and no ſuch foundation hath yet been ſhewn in the preſent caſe. Beſides, the declaration, that *blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt ſhall not be forgiven*, is itſelf an exception from a general rule, that *all manner of ſin ſhall be forgiven*; and to ſuppoſe other exceptions again from this exception, ſeems very unnatural. It would indeed be preſumptuous to reſtrain the mercies of God: but it is equally and perhaps more dangerous to extend them farther, than he permits us.

The addition, that this ſin *ſhall neither be forgiven in this world, nor the world to come*, is taken by many for no more, than a ſtronger and fuller way of ſaying, that it *ſhall not*, or ſhall *never, be forgiven*: which are the expreſſions uſed in St. *Mark* and St. *Luke*. Some underſtand by it, neither in the age or diſpenſation of the law, which was then preſent, when our Saviour ſpoke; nor of the goſpel, which was ready to take place of it: for ſo the phraſes, *this world* and *the world to come*, are uſed in ſome paſſages of the New Teſtament. But others, with good appearance of truth, carry the meaning further, and apprehend it to be; that, whereas corrections, and ſevere ones, are inflicted on many ſins in this life, which yet, through the grace and mercy of God, are not imputed, to mens condemnation, at the laſt day: for this ſin, on the contrary, both heavy puniſhment ſhould fall on the guilty here, and heavier yet hereafter. And accordingly, in fact, theſe blaſphemous *Jews* underwent, in a few years, the moſt dreadful temporal judgements: nor have we cauſe to think of their eternal ſtate otherwiſe, than with great horror. Such then being the ſenſe of our Saviour's words, let us enquire,

III. Why he paſſed a ſentence, thus peculiarly ſevere, againſt this one only ſin.

Now, had the offence been ſpeaking irreverently concerning the perſon of the Holy Ghoſt: it would not have been eaſy to aſſign any reaſon, why that ſhould be leſs pardonable, than the ſame irreverence towards the Father, or the Son. But ſince, as you have ſeen, it was vilifying his miraculous operations and gifts: there appear in it the moſt evident marks of ſuch guilt and danger as could belong to no other. It was the greateſt and wilfuleſt obſtinacy in the wrong, that can be imagined; when they, and all around them, ſaw the moſt illuſtrious and beneficial miracles, done in confirmation of the moſt

moſt holy and benevolent doctrine, to ſtand out in oppoſition to both: to inſiſt, that the devil conſpired againſt himſelf, rather than own the finger of God, where it was ſo exceedingly viſible: and not only to blaſpheme the Son of man thus, during his ſtate of humiliation, at which indeed their prejudices might naturally take ſome conſiderable offence; but after he was *exalted by the right hand of God**, and had *baptized* his apoſtles *with the Holy Ghoſt and with fire*, as *John* had foretold he ſhould†; and enabled them by that means, both to do *greater works than himſelf*‡, and beſides to *underſtand all myſteries*§, to *diſcern* and *make manifeſt the ſecrets of hearts*‖, to *ſpeak with unknown tongues*¶, to *ſhew* beforehand *things to come***, to confer the ſame gifts on whom they would; and when every aſſembly of chriſtians afforded almoſt daily proofs of theſe things; to perſiſt yet, neither *entering into the kingdom of heaven themſelves, nor ſuffering others to enter in*††; and not only to oppoſe, but to revile, the ſtrongeſt evidence, laid before them in the fulleſt manner; and that, very probably, againſt the ſecret conviction of their own hearts too: ſuch behaviour manifeſts the moſt hardened and deſperate wickedneſs. All men muſt ſuppoſe it, and our Saviour knew it, to proceed from an incurable diſeaſe within; prevailing over the powerfulleſt and laſt remedy, which divine wiſdom thought fit to uſe: and therefore his declaration, however awful, was but the natural conſequence of the ſtate they were in. Had they only doubted, had they only denied, there might have been ſome hope of them; but when men are come to railing and blaſpheming, as they were, they have done with attending and conſidering. Yet ſtill, had they only rejected the teſtimony of others concerning the wonderful operations and gifts of the Spirit; ſtronger teſtimony of others, or that of their own ſenſes, might have been added: but when this laſt had been vouchſafed them, there could poſſibly be no higher. It might indeed appear to them, on maturer reflection, more convincing, than at firſt: but after ſufficient leiſure to reflect had been alſo allowed them, as I have ſhewn you, it was; every thing that

* Acts ii. 33. † Matth. iii. 11. ‡ John xiv. 12.
§ 1 Cor. xiii. 2. ‖ 1 Cor. xii. 10. xiv. 25.
¶ 1 Cor. xiv. 2, &c. ** John xvi. 13. †† Matth. xxiii. 13.

that could be done for them, conſiſtently with leaving them freedom of will, had been done, and all in vain.

This, you ſee, is plainly a very different caſe from that of any other ſin. And the peculiar guilt and danger of it conſiſts, not in its being committed againſt the Holy Spirit; but in its being a wilful and obſtinate rejection, from wicked motives, of the only means remaining for reformation and forgiveneſs. Suppoſe the providence of God had ſo ordered it, that all diſeaſes ſhould be curable, by ſome one particular courſe of medecine: ſtill whoever deſpiſed and ridiculed that courſe, inſtead of taking it, muſt periſh. And in like manner, though all ſins would elſe be pardonable through the grace of the goſpel: whoever ſcorns the utmoſt efforts of that grace, muſt fail of it. And our Saviour foreſeeing, that theſe perſons would, pronounces their doom. Every advantage, that any others ever were to enjoy, they had enjoyed to the full, without effect: and it was not ſuitable to the honour of God's government, or the holineſs of his nature, to ſtrive with ſuch by ſtill more extraordinary methods; and do for the worſt of men, what he had not done for the reſt. Their condition, therefore, was not, that they ſhould be denied pardon, though they did repent: but it was foreknown, that they would not repent. So that whoever doth, may be ſure, for that very reaſon, that he hath not been guilty of the unpardonable *blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt*. Indeed no one now, when, through length of time, the circumſtances of the caſe are ſo much altered, can lie under the ſame guilt with thoſe, to whom our Saviour ſpoke: nor can he therefore be under the ſame condemnation: for *the judgement of God is* always *according to truth**. But though we cannot equal the wickedneſs of the *Jews* in this reſpect, yet we may come dreadfully near it. And therefore I proceed now to ſhew you,

IV. What ſins do, or do not, approach towards that, which is mentioned in the text.

And here I ſhall ſpeak ſeparately, firſt of the caſe of unbelievers in Chriſt, then of believers in him.

Unbelievers, ignorant of the goſpel, or of its proper evidence, and who could not help their ignorance, are not blameable

* Rom. ii. 2.

able for their unbelief: nor ſurely inexcuſable, though they ſhould add reproachful words to it, *ſpeaking evil of things which they know not**. And though it be a great unhappineſs to them, that they have neither the ſame means of reformation and ſpiritual improvement, nor the ſame aſſurance of pardon and acceptance, that chriſtians have: yet it is their unhappineſs only, not their fault. But ſuch unbelievers, as through a contemptuous negligence refuſe to conſider the doctrine of Chriſt, or from a vain opinion of the ſufficiency of their own reaſon, or from love to any ſin, reject it; theſe put themſelves in the high road towards the ſin, condemned here by our Saviour. And if they add to their infidelity profane and irreverent language; they advance nearer to it. But if part of that language be aſcribing the miracles and ſpiritual gifts, mentioned in the New Teſtament, to an evil power, of which ſome amongſt them have given intimations; and above all, if they do this from a malicious heart, and perhaps againſt their own inward perſuaſion too; then they come as near to it, as they are able. And yet one cannot but hope, that ſince the evidence of the goſpel is not either quite ſo full and ſtrong, or ſo obvious and eaſily ſeen at once, as it was in the days of our Saviour and his apoſtles; they may, after all, think better of it, repent and obtain pardon.

If indeed they have, ſince they came to a full uſe of reaſon, deliberately profeſſed Chriſtianity, and then forſaken it, and become railers and ſcoffers at it; this caſe is worſe, than if they had never believed; in proportion as they have ſeen the evidences, underſtood the nature, and felt the influences of the goſpel; and yet, after all, have broken the faith, which they had ſolemnly engaged to it. The epiſtle to the *Hebrews* therefore declares *it is impoſſible for thoſe, who were once enlightened, and have taſted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghoſt, and have taſted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they ſhall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; ſeeing they crucify to themſelves the Son of God afreſh, and put him to an open ſhame*†. But then, explicit and terrible as theſe words are, yet ſome of them plainly relate to thoſe miraculous gifts and powers, which we do not now experience, and therefore cannot

* Jude 10. †Heb. vi. 4,—6.

cannot ſin againſt them to that degree, nor by conſequence make our condition ſo deſperate, as thoſe who did; beſides that *impoſſible*, both in ſcripture and common language, often means no more, than extremely difficult and hopeleſs; but not beyond the reach of his grace, *with whom all things are poſſible**. And as this impoſſibility is expreſsly here ſaid to be that of *renewing them to repentance*: (which powerfully ſtrengthens what I have already proved to you, that the *blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt* is unpardonable, only becauſe it leaves no foundation to repent upon) ſo when any one is *renewed to repentance*, this paſſage contains not the leaſt intimation, that he cannot be forgiven.

But ſuppoſing a total and ſettled unbelief and apoſtacy to be ever ſo irretrievable; yet merely having doubted, nay, having inclined to the wrong ſide, or even been a good deal perſuaded of it, and that for ſome time, is very far from being the ſame caſe. The apoſtles themſelves at firſt did not believe the reſurrection of our Saviour: St. *Thomas* ſtood out a whole week: two of them in St. *Luke* ſpeak of their perſuaſion, that this was *he who ſhould have redeemed Iſrael*, as paſt and at an end†. Yet, as all this aroſe from infirmity, not wickedneſs, they met with an eaſy pardon; and ſo will others like them. But few of thoſe, whom ſenſuality, and fewer ſtill, whom vain ſelf-opinion leads to ſcepticiſm, ever recover themſelves. And as this affords no ſmall confirmation to the awful doctrine of the text: ſo it ſhould warn all from taking ſo much as the firſt ſteps in that fatal path, from which men ſo ſeldom return: but eſpecially againſt ſetting out with treating religion and morals in a ſcornful and ludicrous manner; which is directly oppoſite to modeſt and humble inquiry: manifeſts a very criminal partiality, as well as ſufficiency; and naturally terminates in a complete diſregard to every thing wiſe and good.

Thus much concerning infidels and apoſtates. Chriſtians, while they continue ſuch, are in very little danger of committing the ſin, condemned in the text. Some indeed have imagined, that every deliberate tranſgreſſion amounted to it, and was unpardonable; becauſe the epiſtle to the *Hebrews* ſaith, that *if we ſin wilfully, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more ſacrifice for ſins, but a cer-*

* Matth. xix. 26. † Luke xxiv. 21.

*a certain fearful looking for of judgement**. But then it appears very plainly, that not any wilful ſin whatever is meant there, but that one only, which is mentioned immediately before and after; laying aſide *the profeſſion of the faith, treading under foot the Son of God, counting the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, doing deſpite unto the ſpirit of grace;* that is, renouncing and reviling chriſtianity. And it by no means follows, that becauſe they, who have rejected *Chriſt*, will no where find any other atonement for their ſins, therefore they who believe in him, but have criminally violated ſome of his precepts, cannot partake of his atonement, though they apply for it with penitent hearts. It is very true, St. *John* hath told us, *there is a ſin unto death*, at leaſt was in thoſe days, of which if any one was guilty, he could give no encouragement to *pray for him*†. But the whole ſcripture tells us, that not every wilful ſin is certainly unto death: and our Saviour in the text hath told us, that only the *blaſphemy*, the malicious evil-ſpeaking, *againſt the Holy Ghoſt* is ſuch. Now they who believe in the Father and the Son cannot ſurely think ill either of the perſon or the operations of the Spirit; and therefore cannot be ordinarily tempted to ſpeak ill of them, with any real meaning of what they ſay: and unmeaning profane expreſſions, though undoubtedly very full of guilt, and likely to produce more and greater guilt, are yet far from that moſt abandoned wickedneſs, to which the paſſage before us relates.

Sometimes indeed chriſtians, and very good ones, may accuſe themſelves of having entertained irreverent thoughts, and, it may be, ſpoken irreverent words of religion, of the ſcriptures, of the Holy Spirit himſelf: but this hath been, when they were under ſo peculiar a diſturbance of mind, that they had not the command of their thoughts or words: and then they may be abſolutely ſure, that the all-knowing, juſt, and good God will not conſider theſe offences, as, in a moral ſenſe, theirs. In ſome diſorders, it is no more poſſible for men to hinder wicked thoughts from taking poſſeſſion of their minds, or blaſphemous words from coming out of their mouths, than to hinder any other diſtemper, (for plainly this is one) which

* Heb. x. 26, 27. † 1 John v. 16.

may attack any other part of them, from ſhewing itſelf by its common effects. And it is no more a crime, when they are in ſuch a condition, to utter things even againſt God; than it is for a child, in convulſions or light-headed, to ſtrike its parent. And though they may not think themſelves diſordered, and in other reſpects may not be ſo; yet in this want of ſelf-government, proportionably to the degree of it, they certainly are. And it makes no difference at all with regard to their innocence, whether the diſorder be a natural bodily one, affecting the mind; which is notoriouſly the common caſe, though attended ſometimes with very unaccountable ſymptoms; or whether it ariſe from the ſuggeſtions of the wicked one. For as he tempted Chriſt himſelf, ſo he hath ever ſince moleſted chriſtians; and often ſuggeſted the worſt of things to the beſt of men. Our words indeed, notwithſtanding ſuch temptations, we may for the moſt part reſtrain: but we can by no means always prevent impreſſions being made on our imaginations: and how ſtrongly ſoever any one may experience them to be made on his, ſtill the wicked thoughts, which he laments all the while, is terrified at, and almoſt in agonies about, certainly do not proceed from his own will and choice; and for that reaſon, far from being unpardonable ſins, they are in truth no ſins at all; but grievous afflictions, for which God will hereafter reward him, if he endeavours to ſuffer them patiently. This you would immediately perceive, and ſay, in the caſe of any other perſon: and therefore, when occaſion requires, you ſhould ſay it to yourſelf. But if you cannot, or if it proves to no great purpoſe, nay to ſo little that you are driven to the very borders of deſpair, yet deſpair itſelf, ſo far as it is a mere diſeaſe, is not an offence againſt God.

But then, how remote ſoever we are from committing the ſin, which cannot be pardoned; we may too eaſily commit ſuch, as will not be pardoned: for none will, without true repentance. And every tranſgreſſion either invites or drives us into repeated and worſe tranſgreſſions, which inſenſibly ſo *harden us through their deceitfulneſs**, that though, while the *day of ſalvation*† continues, we always may repent, it becomes leſs and leſs likely, that we ever ſhall. And even if we do, we

* Heb. iii. 13. † 2 Cor. vi. 2.

we ſhall, notwithſtanding, even in this world, uſually be great ſufferers one way or another: and, unleſs we become uncommonly zealous in our duty, ſhall attain a much lower degree of happineſs in the next. Bear in your minds therefore the ſon of *Sirach's* words: *Flee from ſin, as from the face of a ſerpent; for if thou comeſt too near it, it will bite thee; the teeth thereof are as the teeth of a lion, ſlaying the ſouls of men. All iniquity is as a two-edged ſword, the wounds whereof cannot be healed**: cannot be healed at all, without danger and difficulty and pain; nor ſo perfectly at beſt, but that ſtill either weakneſs, or ſcars and deformities however, will be left behind. Let us therefore carefully avoid all ſin: but particularly avoid all ſins relating to the Holy Ghoſt, and practiſe all duties relating to him: that ſo, abiding in his fellowſhip, being ſupported by his teſtimony, and rejoicing in his comfort, we may at length be *ſealed with the ſpirit of promiſe, the earneſt of that inheritance*†, to which, *&c.*

* Eccluſ. xxi. 2, 3. † Eph. i. 13, 14.

SERMON LII.

The Happiness of enjoying Satisfying Evidence of the Truth of Christianity.

MATTH. xiii. 16.

But bleſſed are your eyes, for they ſee; and your ears, for they hear.

OUR Saviour, in the parable of the ſower, which occaſioned theſe words, compares the reception of his doctrine in the hearts of men to that of ſeed in different ſorts of ground. Some are like the high-way, beaten and hard, an open thorough-fare to all comers and goers: there it lies looſe on the ſurface, and is immediately cruſhed under foot, or *devoured by the fowls of the air*: the very firſt ſuggeſtion of the devil, the world, or the fleſh, deſtroys at once the effect of all the inſtruction in their duty that is given them. Others reſemble a light, but ſhallow ſoil, with a rock underneath: where the ſeed quickly ſprings up, but is quickly alſo ſcorched and withered. They are glad to believe, and forward to profeſs, what promiſes the favour of God and future happineſs; but impenetrable to all attempts of a thorough change within: bad inclination reſiſts firmly at the bottom, while external performances make a ſpecious appearance to the eye. Whenever the time comes, that they are to ſuffer or loſe any thing for doing their duty, this is much too difficult a ſervice for them; they have no root ſufficient to furniſh them with ſtrength to bear it; they are burnt up, and ſhrivel away to nothing. In a third ſort, the ſeed of the word takes deeper hold, and makes very ſtrong and promiſing ſhoots: but thorns and bad weeds, the earlier poſſeſſors of the field, riſe up and choak it. For theſe grow of themſelves: but it requires culture, and watchfulneſs to root them out: inſtead of which, too many plant them in the midſt of the corn, intangle themſelves,

ſelves, without need, in the cares and riches and pleaſures of this life, which they heedleſsly indulge, till every better principle is weakened, overſhadowed and ſmothered. But ſtill there remains a fourth ſort, *who, in an honeſt and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit**; yet very unequally, *ſome an hundred fold, ſome ſixty, ſome thirty.*

The perſons, to whom this doctrine was delivered, gave immediate proof of its truth. The generality, fond of the ſhew of religion, but dreading to undertake the practice of it in earneſt, *hearing heard not, and ſeeing ſaw not*†, to any uſeful purpoſe, what in this form of ſpeech our Saviour laid before them: as indeed he declares he knew would be their caſe, and therefore deſignedly uſed a manner of expreſſion, which they would not take the trouble, ſmall as it was, to underſtand‡. For ſuch neither deſerved plainer inſtructions, nor would have made any other than a bad uſe of them; which could only have increaſed their guilt. Nay, his diſciples themſelves apprehended his meaning, though obvious enough, but imperfectly: and deſired to have it explained to them§. This however ſhewed a good diſpoſition: and therefore he not only condeſcends to their requeſt, but aſſures them it was a happineſs unſpeakable to have any degree of proper attention to, and ſerious ſenſe of, a thing ſo infinitely important, as God's word. *Bleſſed are your eyes, for they ſee; and your ears, for they hear.* A truth, which, though applicable more eminently; beyond compariſon, to thoſe who heard and ſaw the word of life himſelf, yet muſt hold in proportion of all, who are taught, by the miniſtry of his ſervants, the chriſtian doctrine. This paſſage then aſſerts in a ſtrong manner the benefit of religious inſtruction: which many appear, unhappily for themſelves and others, to undervalue exceedingly.

Indeed we are all very apt to overlook and ſlight the advantages, that we have long enjoyed without interruption, even in our worldly affairs. Health and plenty, ſafety and liberty, excite in us very little thankfulneſs: but the things of another, and, we imagine, diſtant life, make a ſtill fainter impreſſion. Hence great numbers thoughtleſsly diſregard religion: and ſome avowedly diſbelieve it. No wonder, if many of theſe think

† Luke viii. 15. † Matth. xiii. 14. ‡ Ib. § Luke viii. 9.

think teaching it needleſs, or even hurtful. But others alſo, who profeſs to acknowledge the duties, that we owe to our Creator, of a ſober, and righteous, and godly life; yet maintain, that in goodneſs, nay juſtice, he is bound to make them, and in fact hath made them all, ſo evident by nature to every man, that we want no farther information to know the whole of them. But how do they prove this? the goodneſs of God is extended to his various creatures in degrees extremely different; and none is intitled to claim this degree or that. The juſtice of God permits him to give as low capacities to men as he pleaſes: and binds him only to require, in proportion to what he gives. Why then may he not put us under a neceſſity of learning from each other, in a great meaſure, the way to future happineſs, as well as the methods of procuring to ourſelves the conveniences and neceſſaries of common life? ſhould we not be wretchedly furniſhed with theſe, indeed ſhould we be able to ſubſiſt, were each generation, each man, to provide them for his own uſe, without being previouſly taught*? And muſt we not have been much more at a loſs in matters of a moral and ſpiritual nature? we are endued with reaſon: but we ſhould apply it very little, if at all, to ſubjects of this kind; and make a very ſlow progreſs in them, if we did; unleſs education, that is, inſtruction, opened the way, and directed our ſteps. We have an inbred ſenſe of good and evil, which enables us, in many things, *of ourſelves to judge what is right*†. But then, however it comes to paſs, which our boaſted faculties will ſcarce be able to tell us, this moral perception is by no means perfect or diſtinct; and it is mixed with paſſions and appetites, far livelier and ſtronger, that frequently obſcure, and ſometimes pervert it. Still in fact, the duties of life ſeem plain to moſt of us: and ſo we are tempted to conclude, there is no occaſion for inſtruction in them. But how came they to be thus plain? why, principally becauſe we have always had inſtruction. Conſider thoſe nations that have little: for none are entirely deſtitute; every where parents teach their children, and all men teach one another, ſomething: but ſtill is the whole of their duty plain to them? There are doubtleſs parts of it, which they cannot well

* Neque tam eſt acris acies in naturis hominum & ingeniis, ut res tantas quiſquam, niſi monſtratas, poſſit videre; neque tanta tamen in rebus obſcuritas, ut eas non penitus acri vir ingenio cernat, ſi modo aſpexerit. Cic. de Or. l. 3. § 31. † Luke xii. 57.

avoid underſtanding: and they might, with all their diſadvantages, underſtand more than they do: but can they, every one of them, with eaſe find out the whole? How dreadful a condemnation muſt they, who affirm this, paſs on millions at once, for having found out ſo little? We chriſtians are more charitable, and think their darkneſs, though not a juſtification, yet a conſiderable excuſe: but then we muſt inſiſt, that light would be a great bleſſing to them, and that inſtruction is neceſſary to introduce it. For what wretched ignorance of moſt evident, and what ſtrange belief of moſt abſurd, things, in religion and morals, doth all hiſtory ſhew to have prevailed, for ſucceſſive ages, through nations, knowing and learned in other reſpects, but untaught in this?

Nay, to look no farther than ourſelves; how many do we ſee of low capacity, that, with the beſt help, know little, and, with leſs, would ſcarce know any thing? How many of better capacity want leiſure from worldly cares, and would have no time for improvement, if the frequent return of this day did not give it them? How many, even with leiſure, would never turn their minds to the conſideration of their duty, if they were not called to it ſo loudly here, and knowledge in a manner forced upon them? How many indeed, of higher rank as well as lower, appear after all very poorly grounded in the moſt important principles and precepts?

It muſt be conſidered too, that our own reaſon, had we ever ſo much of it, and ever ſo much time and inclination to uſe it, cannot teach us all that we are concerened to know; but there are doctrines of the greateſt moment to fallen creatures, as we are, to be learnt from revelation. Nor is it ſufficient, that each man ſtudy theſe in the bible for himſelf. God hath expreſsly provided, that ſome ſhall inſtruct others in them. Books, written in diſtant countries and ages, cannot be intelligible otherwiſe. And ſeveral very intereſting parts of ſcripture are plainly ſuch, that were moſt men aſked, as the Eunuch was by Philip, *underſtandeſt thou what thou readeſt?* they muſt anſwer, as he did, *how can I except ſome man ſhould guide me**?* And well may they admit ſuch guides, as deſire to lead them, only by proving that the way is right.

But further: were every ſingle dictate, both of reaſon and revelation,

* Acts viii. 30, 31.

revelation, ever ſo eaſy to be underſtood; yet the number of them, ariſing from the various relations, in which we ſtand to our Maker and our fellow-creatures, is much too great to afford any hope of their being all diſtinctly apprehended by all, unleſs it be made the buſineſs of ſome, to point them out to the reſt. Or, though we could each, of ourſelves, form a general notion of the whole: yet particular circumſtances often perplex a general duty; and raiſe conſiderable doubts, what ought to be done; where ſtill it is of great conſequence to do right. The very wiſeſt frequently need advice in ſuch caſes: much more then muſt it be of ſtanding uſe to others.

Beſides: what is in itſelf extremely evident may appear, to a prejudiced mind, uncertain or abſurd. And it is very common for men to be prejudiced greatly againſt plain truths: ſometimes through ignorance or weakneſs; but much oftener, that wrong belief may quiet them in wrong practice. No one indeed can directly believe what he will, merely becauſe he will: but many have ſtrange arts of miſrepreſenting things, and putting fair maſks upon foul errors: which public inſtruction is excellently fitted to pull off; and preſerve all, who are not obſtinate in cheating themſelves, from final ruin. Minds, that have a wrong bias, if ſuffered to proceed without contradiction, would mould their religion into almoſt any ſhape they pleaſed: and great numbers of well-meaning perſons would either fall of their own accord or be led by others, into childiſh and hurtful ſuperſtitions. For human nature hath always been found exceeding prone to them: and the preaching of the goſpel in its purity is the ſafeſt and moſt effectual preſervative againſt them. But it is not ſuperſtition, or enthuſiaſm, alone, that endangers the welfare of mankind, whatever ſome would have us think. Theſe undoubtedly may be pernicious: but profaneneſs and profligateneſs muſt: which in all ages have been too generally practiſed, but in ours are openly defended. Such a ſituation of things makes it doubly neceſſary, that religion and virtue ſhould have a full hearing. Whoever barely wiſhes well to civil ſociety, cannot fail to be in ſome degree concerned for their ſupport. And whoever is in earneſt a chriſtian, will think it of the higheſt importance to the future as well as preſent happineſs of men, that the arguments for our holy faith be propoſed to the world in their genuine force; the objections, which may cauſe uneaſi-

neſs

neſs to good minds, and furniſh matter of triumph to bad ones, anſwered: and the diſingenuous artifices of unbelievers expoſed.

But making known to us what we have to do, to hope and to fear, is only the firſt advantage of religious inſtruction. Though we every one of us knew it completely already; yet unleſs we always recollected it too, as often as there was need, and were influenced by it, frequent admonition would ſtill continue extremely uſeful. Very often the moſt acknowledged truths are the leaſt regarded. They are ſo familiar to us, that they have no effect, but when placing them in a ſtronger light awakens us into a diſtincter attention to them. But eſpecially what affords us no pleaſure, as our duty too ſeldom doth, we are very apt to paſs over as ſlightly as poſſible. The world attracts our eye with a vaſt variety of objects, infinitely more agreeable: to theſe we give up our whole ſouls, and are totally loſt in vehement purſuits or vain amuſements. The ſerious conſideration, what we ought to do in life; and what will follow, if we do it not; ſeldom preſents itſelf to us, and is little encouraged, when it doth. If we think, it is of other matters: if we read, it is for other purpoſes: if we have friends, they will ſcarce look on it as their buſineſs to be more concerned for us, than we are for ourſelves: or, if they were, often they dare not attempt to ſet us right: and too often they, who paſs for ſuch, are moſt artfully induſtrious to lead us wrong. Then, beſides the multitudes of thoſe who are almoſt abſolutely inattentive to their duty, how many are there, who impoſe on themſelves with flattering imaginations, that they perform it faithfully, when they do not: blind to faults and defects, that every one elſe diſcerns in them: proud of merely ſeeming, or merely ſuperficial, good qualities; and having the *name* and ſhew of *living*, while indeed they *are dead**! now both the thoughtleſs and the perſumptuous muſt be brought to a right ſenſe of their condition, or they are ruined for ever: and what can be ſo likely to do this, as the voice of public inſtruction, crying loudly in their ears; calling the former from follies and vanities to the true buſineſs of life, and warning the latter againſt fatal ſelf-deceit? admonitions from this place confeſſedly are founded on ſuch an authority, as warrants us in delivering them with a ſpirit and boldneſs, that men would not bear in private: and

* Rev. iii. 1.

no part of our diſcourſes being ever levelled at any one in particular, we can decently and inoffenſively reprove, with whatever freedom is requiſite, the errors of all in general: *ſhewing the people their tranſgreſſion, and the houſe of Jacob their ſins**.

But, ſuppoſing men both acquainted with their duty, and attentive to their failures; they may ſtill have great need of being directed, what method to take in order to a reformation. Not every one, that deſires to become good, any more than every one that deſires to become healthy, knows the eaſieſt and ſafeſt and ſpeedieſt way to it. Here again therefore ſuch, as have made it their ſtudy, may do great ſervice; animating the dejected, confirming the doubtful, ſtrengthening the weak; informing each, what particular dangers are in their circumſtances moſt to be feared, and by what means to be avoided; when to fly from temptation, when to ſtand their ground againſt it; how to again advantages, how to retrieve loſſes, how to bear up under tedious and ſevere trials; and become, at length, in all things, more than conquerors. Few, it may be feared, are ſerious enough to think of theſe helps with the regard, which they deſerve. But ſome, however, God be thanked, both ſee their uſefulneſs, and have experienced it. Things of this nature, indeed, are often moſt effectually taught in private: but public inſtruction alſo, from time to time, enters far into the particulars of them: though it is, and ought to be, more uſually employed in furniſhing the more general means and motives to piety and virtue: oppoſing to the vehement paſſions that aſſault men, ſuch lively repreſentations, as every one cannot make to himſelf, of the reaſonableneſs, the beauty, the excellency, the rewards of religion; the abſurdity, the deformity, the preſent miſchiefs, the future puniſhments of ſin; ſtripping each vice of its ſpecious diſguiſes, and refuting its plauſible pretences: adminiſtering conſolation under the difficulties of duty, and the afflictions of life; and placing, in a ſtrong light, both the glories and the terrors, that are *ready to be revealed*†.

Such are the natural benefits of religious inſtruction: and evidently none can be greater. If it anſwers its end but imperfectly,

* Iſ. lviii. 1. † 1 Pet. i. 5.

perfectly, and hath often been abuſed to ſerve bad purpoſes: every good thing in the world is equally liable to the ſame charge. Againſt abuſes, it is perhaps no where better guarded, than this nation; nor hath ever been freer from them, than at this time. Imperfections will always be found in what men are to execute: and will in all caſes be repreſented by many, as greater than they are. Particularly in the preſent, ſome will affect to ſhew their own wiſdom, in cenſuring what the public wiſdom hath appointed; ſome will revenge themſelves, by condemning an inſtitution, which muſt condemn the notions they advance, and the lives they lead: ſome will be prejudiced to its diſadvantage by perſonal or party intereſts: and others will be provoked, by diſlike of particular men, to hate the very office they ſuſtain; or, by diſapprobation of ſome parts of an eſtabliſhment, to inveigh againſt the whole. And very commonly they, who afford themſelves the feweſt opportunities of being acquainted with public inſtruction, are loudeſt in their complaints, of the wrong and wretched manner, in which it is given. Now a candid, or an upright man, would never think himſelf at liberty, either to find faults without impartial examination, or to exaggerate thoſe which he might apprehend he did find. And a good, or even a prudent man, far from laying too great a ſtreſs on accidental or ſmall, defects and inconveniences, would labour to conceal, unleſs it were in order to remedy, whatever appeared amiſs, in a thing of ſuch general uſefulneſs. For, if teaching truth, and cautioning againſt error; if ſetting before men their duty, and their intereſt: if directing them how to ſucceed in their views, and how to eſcape dangers; if ſupporting them in a right courſe of action, and deterring them from a wrong one, be of ſervice in any of our concerns; it muſt be of moſt ſervice in the moſt important one of all, religion. And whoever hath need, either to be taught what he did not ſufficiently know, or to be reminded of what he did not ſufficiently conſider; to be reſtrained from doing evil, or excited to do good; to be comforted under the afflictions of life, or encouraged againſt the fears of death; may certainly be the better, if he will, for the preaching of God's word. There are few, one ſhould imagine, ſo perfect, as not to have room left for receiving advantage from it, in ſome of theſe ways.

And whoever conceives he is, cannot with any decency tell the world ſo; which in effect he doth, by ſtaying away from it. At leaſt, he cannot think the bulk of mankind hath attained to this height of knowledge and goodneſs: and therefore he ought to countenance, by his example, what may in all likelihood be of the greateſt benefit to thoſe amongſt whom he lives; and, in proportion as it amends and improves them, will be of no ſmall benefit to himſelf.

For, that inſtruction always hath had, and will have, a mighty influence on the belief and practice of mens duty, not only the nature of the thing, but the teſtimony of all hiſtory, ſacred and profane, ſhews. Our firſt parents were inſtructed by their Creator. Had they not; how quick ſoever the improvements of a ſelf-taught philoſopher may be, when deſcribed from mere imagination, yet reaſon and fact make it highly probable, that even had they continued innocent, they would have been very ignorant for a conſiderable time. But the entrance of ſin muſt enfeeble and darken their underſtandings greatly: and had their knowledge of what they were to do, been ever ſo clear, yet, what they were to expect, and on what terms, when they had failed of doing it, muſt be ſo very obſcure, that it was of the utmoſt importance for God to interpoſe and inform them; as we find in ſcripture he did by the immediate notification of a Redeemer. Divine inſtruction therefore began religion; and human hath preſerved it. Hence that honourable character, given to *Abraham* by God himſelf: *For I know him, that he will command his children, and his houſehold after him; and they ſhall keep the way of the Lord, to do juſtice and judgement**. This pious care, for which he was diſtinguiſhed, ſeems to have been falling into diſregard amongſt the other men of that age. And the conſequence was, what it always will be. The ſeparation of inſtruction from worſhip ſeparated morals from piety: and, when this unnatural divorce brought them to be conſidered, as independent things, the obligations to virtue were fatally weakened, the notions of religion were greatly corrupted, and, in proportion as ignorance increaſed, wickedneſs and ſuperſtition prevailed.

Still

* Gen. xviii. 19.

Still there were, in the heathen world, perſons very eminent for great and good qualities. And as no ſtated public inſtruction was eſtabliſhed among them *, they are ſometimes produced, as arguments againſt the need of it. But their number by no means appears to have been conſiderable. Leſs had been ſaid of them, if the generality of their countrymen had been like them: and what is ſaid, is delivered by authors, chiefly deſirous of gaining honour to themſelves, by drawing beautiful pictures of the merit of their heroes. Yet, after all, we find that merit, even according to the moſt favourable accounts of it, which heighten it far beyond truth†, mixed with great blemiſhes. Their piety, the firſt article of human duty, if they had any, (for ſeveral of their ſyſtems of philoſophy were inconſiſtent with or unfavourable to it) was groſsly idolatrous: their love of their country was greatly injurious to their neighbours; eſpecially thoſe whom they were pleaſed to call barbarians: moſt of them were polluted with unlawful, ſome with unnatural luſts: and none of them ever ſhewed that humility of heart, and deep ſenſe of imperfection and ſin, which belongs to the very beſt of human creatures. Still, ſhining accompliſhments they undoubtedly had: but they had alſo generally private inſtructors at leaſt, from whoſe leſſons they might in a good meaſure derive them? or copied them, though not taught in form, from thoſe, with whom they converſed. Or ſuppoſing the contrary; in every ſcience, in every common art, ſome few will make a great progreſs with ſmall advantages for it: but ſhall we conclude from thence, that any ſort of knowledge can become general, without being generally taught; and every one do what no one is exhorted, or aſſiſted, to learn? Beſides, the original poverty and frugality, the accidental neceſſities and diſtreſſes, nay the unaccountable faſhions and fancies of ſome countries and ages, have brought particular virtues into practice and high repute, and they have been greatly celebrated for them; though deſerving of the ſevereſt cenſure for their faults in other reſpects. And, bad as we are at preſent; it would be doing us great injuſtice, to prefer upon the whole, perhaps the beſt of the heathen times, but certainly the common run of them, to ours.

The

* See Aug. de Civ. Dei. l. 2. c. 4, 6, 7, 16, 22, 16.
† See Leland againſt Tindal, Introd. p. 46, &c.

The number is great in itſelf, though ſmall in compariſon, of ſuch as infinitely excel, in piety, in benevolence, in purity of heart, the utmoſt perfection, to which men, without the grace of the goſpel, could attain. But not to inſiſt on theſe, we are without queſtion in general not only more rational in our devotions, but milder in our treatment of each other, and more regular in our conduct of ourſelves. An impartial reader of the *Greek* and *Roman* authors, eſpecially of ſuch as lived in the times of which they ſpeak, will eaſily ſee and acknowledge this. But were it otherwiſe, their wanting inſtruction, and our having it, cannot poſſibly be the reaſon, that we are inferior to them: but we, without it, ſhould have been ſtill much worſe; and they, with it, ſtill much better. Indeed, they were ſenſible, whatever we are, how great need they had of it: and accordingly the beſt of them, ſome after taking long journeys to inform themſelves, made it their buſineſs to teach others, who applied to them, the wiſeſt rules they could, for the conduct of life. But they plainly found, both their knowledge ſo imperfect, and their authority ſo inſufficient; that they declared, of their own accord, what many now ſet themſelves to deny; that interpoſition from above was requiſite to inform and influence mankind.

This advantage the poſterity of *Abraham* enjoyed. And though they did not receive from it near the good they might; as indeed we none of us ever do from any advantage; yet it produced, beſides the more diſtinguiſhed examples of piety and holineſs, mentioned in ſcripture, and doubtleſs many others, a conſiderable degree of national faith in the one true God, and obedience to his laws; which was not only a bleſſing to that ſingle country, but ſcattered ſome rays of light through all the people, that ſat in darkneſs round them. And no ſooner had they learnt from their captivity, inflicted on them for their neglect of the divine commands, to ſet up and carry on a more conſtant and extenſive courſe of inſtruction, than they had done before, by *reading* and interpreting the ſcriptures *every Sabbath Day in the ſynagogues*[a] of every city; than their inveterate, and till then incurable, diſeaſe of idolatry ceaſed from amongſt them almoſt intirely; and they preſerved

[a] Acts xv. 21.

preſerved for many ages a more uniform regard to their duty, than they ſeem to have had, ever ſince they were a nation.

But at length, even this method of inſtruction being corrupted by the eſtabliſhed diſpenſers of it, *the light* itſelf *became darkneſs**. And then was the proper ſeaſon for the great enlightener of the world to appear: who detected and condemned the abuſes of this inſtitution, placed the conduct of it in better hands, and forbad his followers for ever that blind ſubmiſſion to *the doctrines of men, which had made the commandments of God of no effect*†. Nor did he only purify, but perfect it with ineſtimable additions of new knowledge: whence he tells his apoſtles, immediately after the text: *Verily I ſay unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have deſired to ſee thoſe things which ye ſee, and have not ſeen them; and to hear thoſe things which ye hear, and have not heard them.* After which, his concluding care was to provide, by due regulations, for the perpetual ſupport of this ordinance; and promiſe the miniſters of it, that *he would be with them alway, even unto the end of the world*‡. We are therefore not only to eſteem it, as a prudent and uſeful thing; but to reverence it, as the appointment of our Lord and Maſter; and attend on it in faithful expectation of his bleſſing. For under whatever diſadvantages of human weakneſs the goſpel is often preached, it is ſtill *the power of God unto ſalvation*§, to all that hear it, as they ought. Nor can we hope, that he who *reſiſteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble*‖, will give it thoſe, who ſet up their own wiſdom againſt that of heaven; which hath expreſsly ordained *paſtors and teachers, for the edifying of the body of Chriſt*¶. And ſo effectually did this method, unaſſiſted by human art or power, build up the church in ſpite of all oppoſition of every kind; that, in a ſmall compaſs of time, the chriſtian faith was diffuſed through the earth, drove atheiſm, idolatry and vice into corners, wherever it appeared; and planted in their ſtead, rational piety, benevolent virtue, moral ſelf-government, founded on the ſure proſpect of eternal felicity.

Happy

* Matth. vi. 23. † Matth. xv. 6, 9. ‡ Matth. xxviii. 20.
§ Rom. i. 16. ‖ James iv. 6. ¶ Eph. iv. 11, 12.

Happy would mankind have been, had the purity and good influence of this excellent doctrine been preſerved, by a careful uſe of the means, that recommended it firſt. But, by degrees, preachers *handled the word of God deceitfully**, and hearers *turned away their ears from the truth unto fables*†: inſtruction was partly perverted, partly diſuſed: error and ſuperſtition returned in a new form, and ignorance and wickedneſs again overſpread the world. Once more, two centuries ago, the reſtoration of a preaching miniſtry reſtored truth and freeedom amongſt us: and keeping up a due reſpect for it, is our great ſecurity againſt the dreadful alternative of open profaneneſs and profligateneſs, or Popiſh darkneſs and tyranny: the former of which evils, in all likelihood, if ever it prevails, will ſoon make way for the latter. And therefore religious inſtruction, which guards us at once againſt both, is a moſt important public good.

Its private advantage to particular perſons ſeems indeed often to be ſmall. Multitudes there are, as bad, notwithſtanding it, as one can well imagine they would be without it: and for this reaſon ſome deny its benefit. But ſurely it is a ſtrange objection againſt the uſefulneſs of a medicine, that they who refuſe to take it, or neglect to take it regularly, are never the better for it. Many deſpiſe and ridicule this inſtitution; and yet from time to time gravely complain of the little good it doth, whilſt they are diligently endeavouring, that it ſhall do ſtill leſs. And of the reſt of mankind, few attend it ſo conſtantly as they ought, and fewer ſtill with a due degree of right diſpoſition. Yet after all, the number made truly and inwardly religious and virtuous by it, is not contemptible; thoſe that are amended in part, or kept back from being miſchievouſly wicked, are very large: and in how much worſe a condition we ſhould quickly be, were it laid aſide, is abundantly more eaſy to foreſee, than ſafe to try. Too much trial indeed we have had already: more than enough to find, that as the contempt of God's word and worſhip increaſes, idleneſs, debauchery, diſhoneſty, ſpread through the generality of mankind: evils, which one ſhould think every one is greatly concerned to prevent, but eſpecially the upper part of the world, both

* 2 Cor. iv. 2. † 2 Tim. iv. 4

both for the ſake of their inferiors and their own. How far the ſame bad conſequences have taken place amongſt themſelves, might perhaps appear diſreſpectful to ſay: but we may ſurely beg, that they and all men would ſeriouſly conſider, what one good effect they have ever obſerved to follow from diſregarding the appointed exerciſes of religion: in what better way the time, allotted for theſe exerciſes, is generally employed by thoſe, who frequent them not; and what harm could poſſibly follow, if, from obedience to the command of God, from a reſpect to public authority, from concern for public welfare, from tenderneſs for their own private reputation, and (may we not add ?) from hope of poſſibly receiving ſome little improvement too, they ſhould prevail on themſelves to ſpend at church, every week, a few of thoſe hours, which they do not ſeem, on other occaſions, to reckon ſo very precious. Doing this, and requiring thoſe who depend on you to do it alſo, you cannot have occaſion to regret very bitterly: omitting it, whatever you think now, perhaps you may, certainly you will, repent: God grant the time may come, before it is too late. Let us therefore now make this, amongſt others, one trial of our ſpiritual ſtate, whether *we have loved the habitation of God's houſe, the place where his honour dwelleth**: whether we *receive the word with all readineſs of mind*†, and *deſire the ſincere milk of it*, as St. *Peter* expreſſes himſelf, *that we may grow thereby*‡. If not, let us ſtir up ourſelves to the more conſtant and zealous practice of a duty, which the apoſtle to the *Hebrews* enjoins as an indiſpenſable one, even in the midſt of ſevere perſecutions: with whoſe words I conclude. *Let us hold faſt the profeſſion of our faith without wavering, and provoke one another unto love and good works, not forſaking the aſſembling of ourſelves together, as the manner of ſome is, but exhorting one another: and ſo much the more, as ye ſee the day approaching*§.

* Pſ. xxvi. 8.
† Acts xvii. 11.
‡ 1 Pet. ii. 2.
§ Heb. x. 23, 24, 25.

SERMON LIII.

The Qualities of a Pious and Devout Hearer of the Word of God.

Luke viii. 18.

Take heed therefore how ye hear.

EVERY advantage, beſtowed on us by providence, is a truſt, of which we muſt hereafter give account. The advantages, which tend more immediately to our improvement in piety and virtue, are a truſt of the moſt important kind: and religious inſtruction holds a principal rank among theſe. Its nature is excellently fitted to do men good: the grace of God is ever ready to accompany it: and yet very frequently it fails of its end. Doubtleſs too often this is our fault, who are employed to diſpenſe it. We do not preach, we do not live, as we ſhould: may God be merciful to us and amend us: for heavy will be our condemnation, if we wilfully tranſgreſs, or ſupinely neglect, either part of our duty. But the word of God, even when delivered by unſkilful and wicked hands, hath power enough to produce its effect, if received as it ought: and though delivered by the ableſt and beſt, too commonly, for want of being ſo received, produces none. *Preachers of righteouſneſs*, from the days of *Noah*[*] to this, have found their warnings in a great meaſure fruitleſs. Prophets, expreſsly commiſſioned from heaven, have been rejected or diſregarded by thoſe, to whom they were ſent. Nay, the Son of God himſelf, as indeed his whole hiſtory, but eſpecially his parable in this chapter ſhews, met with many, in whoſe hearts his doctrine either gained no reception, or ſoon witherd away, or was choked with thorns; for af ew, who brought forth good fruit, in a greater degree or a leſs. And if it was needful for him,

[*] 2 Pet. ii. 5.

him, who *ſpake as never man did**, who confirmed his diſcourſes by miracles, and adorned both by a life of perfect holineſs, to bid his apoſtles themſelves *take heed how they heard*: much more ought his miniſters now to give his people the ſame caution, and they to obſerve it. You think, and they, very truly, that a great deal is incumbent on us, but do you conſider, what is incumbent on yourſelves? Our reaſons to deſire that our preaching may be ſucceſsful, are very ſtrong: but yours are yet ſtronger. If we fail of converting you, provided we endeavour it faithfully, we have *delivered our own ſouls*: but if you fail of being converted, you *die in your iniquity*†. The goſpel is *the ſavour of life or of death*‡, to all that hear it. Thoſe, who are careful to improve by it, God will bleſs with further improvements: thoſe, who are not, he will leave in his juſt judgement to grow worſe and worſe: or, to ſpeak the language of our Saviour juſt after the text; *Whoſoever hath, to him ſhall be given; and whoſoever hath not, from him ſhall be taken even that which he ſeemeth to have.*

Being therefore ſo deeply concerned in the matter, let us all conſider, with what diſpoſition of heart we ought to receive religious inſtruction.

1. And in the firſt place, that we ſhould hearken to it with attention, is exceedingly plain: for elſe both ſpeaking and hearing are loſt labour. And yet how many are there, who vouchſafe not even ſo much regard to the doctrine of ſalvation? Decency perhaps brings us hither: and a failure of making our appearance might be remarked to our diſadvantage: but whether our minds are abſent, cannot be ſo eaſily obſerved: and therefore about that, we are very indifferent. Or we come of courſe; without reflecting, what end is deſigned to be ſerved by it: and, though our conſciences would not let us ſtay away, yet we have never bethought ourſelves, that being here without any care to become the wiſer for it, amounts very nearly to the ſame thing. Moſt however have ſurely ſome general intention of minding what they are about: but in ſo weak a degree, that every ſuggeſtion of every kind overpowers it. Some ſet their hearts on the affairs, and ſome on the pleaſures of life ſo intirely, that theſe objects croud in at the moſt improper times, and drive out all others. Too many have indulged an indolent thought-

 leſſneſs,

* John vii. 56. † Ezek iii. 19. ‡ 2 Cor. ii. 16.

leſſneſs, till applying their minds in earneſt to any thing is become extremely difficult and painful to them. Not a few are engaged ſo deeply in obſervation of what they ſee at church, that they have no room left for taking notice of what they hear. There are perſons too, who have ſo much to ſay one to another, that they loſe, and make thoſe around them loſe, much of what the preacher hath to ſay to them all. And frequent mutual informations, it ſeems, are of ſuch importance and neceſſity to be communicated immediately, that even the duties of hearkening to God's word in the leſſons, and ſinging his praiſes in the pſalms, muſt give way to them. But indeed the beſt diſpoſed, and moſt conſiderate, are not ſo happy always, as to command their own thoughts. Our imaginations, however carefully checked, are too apt, on every occaſion, to preſent us with a multiplicity of fancies and notions, quite foreign to the buſineſs we are upon: but never more ſo, than in the midſt of our religious exerciſes. And when once our minds are got looſe; an effect, which the leaſt accident will produce; then on they run from one thing to another, hanging together by ſome kind of whimſical connection, till we are carried we know not whither: and if we try to recover ourſelves, are often loſt a ſecond time in the very endeavour. Some degree of this is merely the weakneſs of our fallen condition: and ſome have by nature more of it than others: for which they have indeed cauſe to be ſorry, yet not to think deſpondingly of their ſpiritual condition. But ſtill, too much of it is commonly our own fault. We have taught ourſelves to be ſo unſettled as we are, by indulging a languid indifference to the moſt intereſting of all our concerns; and perhaps too, by delighting in the vain amuſement, which theſe roving ideas give us, at the moſt improper ſeaſons. The cure of this bad habit is very difficult: and therefore our watchfulneſs againſt its growing upon us ought to be the greater: and our attempts to root it out, more cloſely followed. We muſt beg of God pardon for our paſt neglects, and aſſiſtance for the time to come. We muſt imprint on our minds, beforehand, as deeply as ever we can, the importance of inſtruction in our duty: and come to it with the moſt deliberate and firmeſt purpoſe of ſtrict attention. We muſt call ourſelves back immediately, when we

we find we are wandering: and without ſtaying at all to diſcover what it was, that led us off, return without delay to the ſubject before us. We muſt alſo make it a rule to recollect afterwards the principal things, that have been ſaid to us. For not only this will tie us down to mind them the more, when they are ſpoken; but minding them ever ſo much juſt then, will ſingly be of ſmall benefit: we muſt think them over and over at home, till we digeſt them into laſting nouriſhment; and, as the apoſtle directs, give ſuch *earneſt heed to the things which we have heard*, that we may not *at any time, let them ſlip**.

2. But hearing God's word with attention will probably do us no good, unleſs, in the ſecond place, we hear it alſo without prejudice againſt it: for elſe we ſhall attend to it, only to find fault, invent objections, and ſo lead ourſelves into error; which may be worſe than ignorance. Now unreaſonable partiality is blame-worthy in all caſes: but extremely ſo, when it operates to the diſadvantage of religion. The doctrines of natural piety and morality are confeſſedly of the plaineſt and greateſt uſe to the preſent peace and comfort, as well as the future happineſs, of mankind. And thoſe which revelation hath added, illuſtrate, confirm, and ſupply the defects of the former, in the moſt perfect degree. Prepoſſeſſion therefore againſt either, is oppoſition to our own chief good, to that of the world in general: and every worthy, every prudent man, who at all underſtands what chriſtianity is, cannot but hearken to it with delight, and heartily wiſh to find it true; and when he is convinced it is, deſire to have it conſtantly inculcated on himſelf and his fellow-creatures, throughout the earth. To vain and vicious minds indeed hearing it faithfully preached muſt give uneaſineſs. But ſtill ſuch preaching is the moſt real, the moſt ſeaſonable and neceſſary kindneſs, that can be done them. Unwelcome truths will be never the leſs truths, but much the more dreadful, for their ſtudying to diſbelieve them. And therefore the wicked, beyond all others, are concerned, to take notice of the threatenings of the goſpel, lay hold on its mercies, and examine their lives by its precepts; whenever they know, or but ſuſpect, they have acted wrong. Nay, ſuppoſe

* Heb. ii. 1.

poſe they have no ſuſpicion of that ſort, yet unprejudiced attention to the preaching of it can do them no harm; and may do them more good, than they think of. We require no implicit ſubmiſſion to what we teach. We warn you againſt it. So far as our doctrine is diſcerned by your reaſon, or felt by your conſciences, to be true: or appears to ſtand on the teſtimony of God; ſo far only believe us. *We ſpeak as to wiſe men; judge ye what we ſay**. All that we aſk is, judge uprightly. For prepoſſeſſion hurries people to condemn what they will not have patience to underſtand: they imagine articles of faith to be unintelligible, and rules of life to be unreaſonable, without the leaſt foundation; and alarm themſelves and others with phantoms, the mere creatures of their own fancies.

But though irreligious prejudices always prevail too much: yet there are times, when faſhion gives a more than ordinary countenance to them: when all, that would make a genteel figure, muſt throw aſide the antiquated notions of learning their duty; and think, or ſeem to think, ill or meanly of thoſe who are to teach it. Now whether you have need to learn any thing which you did not know, or be reminded of any thing which you had forgotten, or be excited to any thing which you neglect, or diſſuaded from any thing which you practiſe, I muſt leave to your own conſciences. The word of God, the wiſdom of all civilized nations, the judgement and experience of all wiſe men declare that every one hath need of theſe things. And as for us, whoſe buſineſs is to teach: paying us too much regard, we acknowledge, is a dangerous temptation to us; and may do, and hath done, great harm to true religion, to virtue, to human ſociety: but paying us too little, is full as likely to do harm. And we appeal to yourſelves: which extreme are the people of this land at preſent moſt inclined to? Certainly you ought to have your eyes open to our faults and imperfections: elſe they will encreaſe: but you ought to conſider at the ſame time, how difficult it is for any ſet of men, and for us in particular, to behave ſo unblameably, as we ſhould. And indeed while we diſcharge our office with any good degree of faithfulneſs, the beneficial nature of it ſhould methinks intitle us

* 1 Cor. x. 15.

us to ſome peculiar ſhare of the good-will and candour of mankind. At leaſt, no one ſhould, either deſignedly or inconſiderately, make ſuch harſh interpretations of what we ſay or do, as would be univerſally thought unjuſt, or uncharitable, with reſpect to any other men. For ſuch treatment will not only injure us, but make us in a great meaſure uſeleſs to thoſe under our care: which is a matter of public concern. They, who are inſtructed or admoniſhed by one, of whom they think amiſs, let him lay before them ever ſo important truths, very ſeldom take much notice of them. Yet this is one prejudice againſt which you ought to guard with your beſt diligence. The *Scribes* and *Phariſees* were both ill men, and our Saviour's bittereſt enemies: yet ſince they *ſat in Moſes' ſeat*, were the authorized inſtructors of the people, he commanded his diſciples to *obſerve and do whatſoever* duties *they bade them**. Aſk your own hearts then, are you thus diſpoſed in relation to every truth, which you hear from us; of whom, we hope, you have cauſe to entertain a ſomewhat better opinion, than of them?

But they, who have no general prejudice againſt religious inſtruction or the diſpenſers of it, have notwithſtanding too often very blameable antipathies to particular ſubjects. Some are highly pleaſed, when we enlarge on points of faith: but hate to hear thoſe of practice much enforced. Others are for practical diſcourſes only: and forget, that faith is the neceſſary foundation of them; and if it were not, that God hath the ſame right to our believing what he teaches as to our doing what he requires. Some would have preaching conſiſt wholly of moral doctrines; and hold piety in contempt, as an uſeleſs enthuſiaſtical thing: though both reaſon and ſcripture ſay, it *is the firſt and great commandment*†. Others deſpiſe morality, as an inferior heatheniſh attainment: and think only the ſublimer parts of religion ſhould be taught: though the apoſtle ſaith expreſsly, *I will that thou affirm conſtantly that they, who have believed in God, be careful to maintain good works: theſe things are good and profitable unto men*‡. Many will pay great attention to the gracious promiſes of the goſpel: but

* Matth. xxiii. 2, 3. † Matth. xxii. 38. ‡ Tit. iii. 8.

but little or none to its laws and threatnings. Or, if they are willing we ſhould dwell on ſome precepts, which not they, but their neighbours, tranſgreſs; ſtill they turn a deaf ear to all that can be ſaid on others: and one would except his unjuſt gains, a ſecond his vicious pleaſures, a third his vain amuſements, a fourth his ill humour, a fifth his cauſeleſs ſeparation, from being any proper matter of our animadverſion. In ſhort, with moſt hearers, ſome points are in ſuch favour, that they can hardly be repeated too often, or carried too far: and others ſo unwelcome, that the very mention of them gives offence. They have not patience enough to diſcern the true ſtate of the queſtion: much leſs to obſerve the force of the arguments for it; or conſider the anſwers to their objections againſt it: but reject immediately with anger, whatever thwarts their inclination, or preconceived opinion: unmindful of the prophets reproof to the Jews of old: *This is a rebellious people, that will not hear the law of the Lord; which ſay to the ſeers, ſee not: and to the prophets, propheſy not unto us right things, ſpeak unto us ſmooth things, propheſy deceits**. But however apt we are to think otherwiſe, both our buſineſs and our intereſt is, not to ſhut our eyes againſt inſtruction, but make uſe of the light it offers; not to fence againſt conviction, but lay open our hearts to the impreſſion of truth, be it ever ſo painful; *and receive with meekneſs the ingrafted word, which is able to ſave our ſouls*†. For thoſe duties, which we the leaſt like to hear of, may be, and often are, the moſt needful to be inculcated upon us of all others. Thoſe doctrines, of which we are the moſt firmly perſuaded, may, for aught we know, unleſs we have examined them well, be great miſtakes. And even ſuppoſing them true, yet attending only to one part of the truth, may lead us into error.

3. The third diſpoſition, requiſite in attending on the word of God, is ſerioufneſs of heart. There are many, who have no poſitive prejudices, founded on ſeeming arguments againſt it, but ſo thoughtleſs and giddy, that they ſlight it moſt ſurpriſingly. At beſt, they look on what is delivered from hence, as ſomething of courſe to be ſaid, and not to be minded. But in

* Iſ. xxx. 9, 10. † James i. 21.

in their livelier moods they can divert themſelves extremely with the moſt ſolemn exhortations; and their gaiety is apt to riſe the higher, the more earneſtly their duty is preſſed upon them. Now undoubtedly the exertion of a cheerful temper, when regulated by good ſenſe and propriety, is very innocent, as well as agreeable. But to ſeek for matter of drollery in every thing; and dreſs up ſubjects of the utmoſt importance in ludicrous diſguiſes, to delight ourſelves and others with laughing at them, is the fillieſt affectation of wit, and the moſt dangerous kind of folly. Remember then: what your Maker enjoins, what your eternal happineſs or miſery depends on, is worthy of the moſt awful attention, even of the moſt ſprightly mind: beſides that the ſame levity, which inclines men to play thus with religious truths, uſually diſpoſes them to treat the weightieſt affairs of common life with the ſame ſort of ſportful indiſcretion, till at length *the end of that mirth is heavineſs**, even in this world.

Sometimes indeed want of ſerious regard to what we hear, may not ſeem altogether inexcuſable. Subjects of the greateſt moment may be handled ſo improperly, as to diſguſt even the well-meaning; and poſſibly raiſe contemptuous, inſtead of devout reflections. But as it muſt be a very wrong heart, that takes occaſion to be thus moved, where none is given: ſo if much be given, which ſurely is not frequently the caſe, it cannot be a right heart, which dwells on ſuch things only, or chiefly. Conſider: here you come, in obedience to the appointment of God, to learn or recollect the doctrines and the precepts, that lead to ſalvation. One or more of them are accordingly laid before you and recommended to you: but unhappily with ſome peculiarity, it may be, of phraſe or manner; ſome arguments not of the ſtrongeſt, ſome irregularity of method, or want of livelineſs or prudence: in ſhort, ſome mixture or other of human infirmity. Ought theſe defects, be they ever ſo real, though poſſibly after all they are but imaginary, to change the important buſineſs you are upon, into an ill-natured amuſement: and turn you aſide, from the improvement of your own ſouls, to an idle criticiſm upon another man's performance? Or is it the concern of every one of us, to profit by all we can, ſupply what is wanting, add ſtrength to what is weak; and paſs lightly over the imperfections of our inſtructors, remembering our own?

* Prov. xiv. 13.

But they, who by no means hear ſermons with contempt, will yet be far from due ſerioufneſs, if they hear them only with curioſity. And this it may be feared is a very common caſe. We want to have ſome faſhionable controverſy diſcuſſed, ſome difficult paſſage of ſcripture explained, ſome darling ſpeculation enlarged on, ſome plauſible hypotheſis propoſed: in a word, ſomething told us, that may prove a pleaſing exerciſe of our underſtandings at the time, and a help to converſation afterwards. Diſcourſes, of which we can make this uſe, we ſeldom think of putting to any better; of ſuch as we cannot, we ſoon grow weary, and hearken impatiently after other *teachers*, *having*, as the apoſtle expreſſes it, *itching ears**. Thus we pay moſt earneſt attention to what we hear: and receive abſolutely no good from it. For filling our heads, in this manner, is rather the way to corrupt our hearts, than to amend them. Learning and ingenuity are doubtleſs of great ſervice in explaining, defending, and adorning religion. But ſtill the things, which a ſerious man will chuſe to have moſt inſiſted on in the pulpit, are thoſe, which he is moſt concerned to practiſe, and moſt liable to fail in, the plain common rules of a chriſtian life. There is nothing new perhaps in ſuch diſcourſes: nothing, but what you have often heard and well remember. But have you minded it as effectually as you ought? Searching into this may poſſibly be new enough to you; how agreeable, God and ourſelves know beſt: but it is needful, without queſtion. Repeating to you ever ſo often the precepts, which you are conſcious you obſerve, will give you pleaſure. And the more unpleaſing the repetition of the reſt is, the more neceſſary it will be. "This kind of preaching hath no entertainment in it." Very true. But is it for entertainment that you come to the houſe of God? Such as do, muſt not take it amiſs to be diſappointed; but ſubmit, inſtead of what they wiſh, to have what they want, given them; the knowledge of their duty, their ſins, their Saviour, their grounds of hope or fear in relation to eternity. At leaſt, whatever they might like for themſelves, they muſt permit others to *have the goſpel preached to them*†.

But

* 2 Tim. iv. 3. † Matth. xi. 5.

But ſuppoſing you are ever ſo deſirous to hear ſermons, ever ſo proper: on what account do you deſire it? Perhaps only to enjoy the ſatisfaction, which a well compoſed diſcourſe naturally affords. Your ear is gratified, your ſentiments are enlivened, agreeable emotions of various kinds are excited. So the hearer is pleaſed, the ſpeaker commended, and followed; but with no thought of practiſing one word he hath ſaid. This is the turn of mind, ſo admirably deſcribed, many ages ago, by the prophet *Ezekiel*. *Son of man, the children of thy people ſtill are talking of thee* by the walls and in the doors of the houſes, and ſpeak one to another, every one to his brother, ſaying, come, I pray you, and hear what is the word, that cometh forth from the Lord. And they come and ſit before thee as my people; and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they ſhew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetouſneſs;* their worldly deſires of whatever ſort. *And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely ſong, of one that hath a pleaſant voice, and can play well on an inſtrument; for they hear thy words, but they do them not*†. Religious inſtruction could never be appointed to give ſuch empty, inſignificant delight as this: nor doth it in the leaſt attain its proper end, unleſs it influences men to forget the preacher, and think of themſelves: unleſs it raiſes in them, not a ſuperficial complacency, or an idle admiration? but an awful ſolicitude about their eternal welfare, and that a durable one.

Conſtitutional warmth of temper is often blown up into a pious flame, that goes out almoſt as ſuddenly, as it was kindled. Lively affections are experienced; excellent deſigns are formed; every thing promiſes wonderfully well for a time; and then ſinks down into nothing. Or, it may be, men are moved anew, and reſolve anew, at every good ſermon they hear: but they cool again long before the next, and bring no fruit to maturity. Now a life of religious feelings and inten-

 tions,

* This is the marginal, and the right tranſlation.

† Ezek. xxxiii. 30, 31, 32.

See an excellent diſcourſe of *Muſonius* the philoſopher on this ſubject. *A. Gell.* l. 5. c. 1. See alſo *Arr. Epict.* l. 3. c. 23. And the character of *Socrates*'s diſcourſes given by *Alcibiades* on his own experience. *Plat. Conviv.* See alſo *Seneca*, Ep. 52.

tions, with an irreligious failure of acting ſuitably to them, is not the life of a chriſtian, nor will it ever procure us the reward of one.

4. There ſtill remains then a fourth requiſite, without which, however attentive, impartial, and ſerious, we are, we ſhall fall ſhort; but towards which all theſe qualities greatly contribute: and what that is, the apoſtle plainly ſignifies to us, where he ſaith, *The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith, in them that heard it**. And the faith, that we muſt have, to make it profit us, is not a mere hiſtorical perſuaſion of the truth of the goſpel, though with this we are to begin; but a deep ſenſe of our need of God's mercy promiſed in it; a thankful acceptance of the terms, on which that mercy is offered; an humble reliance on a crucified Saviour for pardon, grace and ſtrength; with a firm dependance on having theſe bleſſings conveyed to us, through a right uſe of the means which he hath ordained for that end; his word, and ſacraments, and prayer. Such *faith* indeed muſt *come by hearing* at firſt, as the apoſtle hath obſerved†. But this is no objection againſt the neceſſity of exerciſing it afterwards, in order to hear as we ought: and exerciſing duly our preſent lower degree of it, is the only way to obtain a higher. Every one therefore, who deſires benefit from religious inſtruction, muſt attend on it with humility of heart, as a falling, ſinful, undeſerving creature; to whom it makes known a method of recovery, which of himſelf he could never have found out or imagined. He muſt *receive it*, when delivered conformably to ſcripture, *not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God*‡, muſt labour to ſtrengthen his conviction of theſe things. He muſt apply earneſtly to him, whoſe gift faith is, for that *faith* in his goſpel, *which worketh by love*§. For when once we come to love our Maker, our Redeemer, our Sanctifier, we ſhall bear the very hardeſt parts of our duty with willing minds, and perform the whole with a cheerful and perſevering zeal; till which time, all remains imperfect and ineffectual. Every attainment that comes ſhort of uniform univerſal obedience, however ſpecious it be, leaves us in effect very nearly, if not quite, where we were. St. *James*'s compariſon is perfectly juſt.

Be

* Heb. iv. 2.
† Rom. x. 17.
‡ 1 Theſſ. ii. 13.
§ Gal. v. 6.

*Be ye doers of the word; and not hearers only, deceiving your own ſelves. For if any be a hearer of the word and not a doer; he is like unto a man, beholding his natural face in a glaſs. For he beholdeth himſelf, and goeth his way; and ſtrait way forgetteth, what manner of man he was**. Yet this too plainly appears to be the common method. A great part, even of thoſe, who come to hear from a principle of conſcience, ſuch as it is, mind exceedingly little at the time, reflect leſs afterwards, and continue juſt the ſame men they were before. They wonder indeed, that their neighbours take no more notice of what is ſaid: and can even wreſt paſſages in ſermons to meanings, which they were never intended to have, and are ſcarce, if at all capable of, in order to point them againſt the faults of others; while they think not in the leaſt of correcting their own, be they ever ſo plainly deſcribed: as if religion were made for every one elſe to practiſe, but themſelves. It would really ſeem quite impoſſible, if daily experience did not ſhew it, that men could be told ſo plainly, and warned ſo frequently, of tranſgreſſions and follies, which they cannot deny to be ſuch by which often they not only do great harm, but ſuffer great uneaſineſs, in this world, and which they are ſenſible muſt bring on them, if not forſaken, the heavieſt vengeance of God in the next; yet ſit all the while as unconcerned, as if the diſcourſe were about ſome perfectly indifferent matter; and go away at laſt, without ſo much as a ſingle thought of ever changing their conduct. Or if they do think of reforming, it is at ſome diſtant time; like *Felix, when they have a convenient ſeaſon*†; and this they look on as a very pious intention: whereas indeed it is only determining to live on wickedly for the preſent, and leave off they know not when. Or they reſolve from henceforward to perform ſome part of their duty, the more eaſy, or profitable, or faſhionable, perhaps: but neglect the reſt, as much as ever. Or they go farther, and will break looſe from all their ſins: but they will not avoid thoſe temptations, that muſt in all likelihood bring them back ſoon into their former bondage; nor make uſe of thoſe means, that would *preſerve* them from it. Thus, one way or other, they contrive to *hear the word, and not to do it*; and all they get by this artful management, as St. *James*, in the paſſage above-mentioned, hath

* James i. 22, 23, 24. † Acts xxiv. 25.

hath excellently obſerved, is *deceiving their own ſelves*. For God we can never deceive; men we very ſeldom do; nay even ourſelves, for the moſt part, we are able to cheat but poorly; and could we ſucceed in it as completely, as we wiſh, we ſhould be only the more irretrievably ruined.

Take heed therefore, how ye hear; and begin your care with conſidering ſo ſeriouſly, and improving ſo faithfully, what hath been delivered to you for that purpoſe now, that you may reap the trueſt and utmoſt advantage you can, from whatever ſhall be any where taught you hereafter. *Laying aſide all malice, and all guile and hypocriſy, as new-born babes, deſire the ſincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby**: *grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jeſus Chriſt: to him be glory, both now and for ever. Amen*†.

* 1 Pet. ii. 1, 2. † 2 Pet. iii. 18.

SER-

SERMON LIV.

The Evil and Danger of Fickleness in Religion.

Josh. xxiv. 15.

And if it ſeem evil unto you to ſerve the Lord, chooſe you this day whom you will ſerve: whether the gods which your fathers ſerved, that were on the other ſide of the flood; or the gods of the Amorites, in whoſe land ye dwell; but as for me and my houſe, we will ſerve the Lord.

THE Sovereign diſpoſer of all things, being reſolved to deſtroy the inhabitants of the land of *Canaan* for their impious and barbarous idolatries and unnatural luſts, was pleaſed to make the *Jews*, who were a much better, though far from a blameleſs, people, the inſtruments of their deſtruction, in order to warn them the more ſtrongly againſt the like ſins. Their leader in this awful work was *Joſhua*; who, after he had accompliſhed it, divided his conqueſts amongſt them; and then, having received, from the gratitude of the people, an inheritance in his own tribe, no way conſiderable, which however was all that he aſked*; appears to have retired thither, and ſpent the reſt of his days in an honourable privacy; leaving the adminiſtration of affairs, in time of peace, to the ordinary civil magiſtrates: till, finding his end approach, he *gathered all Iſrael, and called for their elders, their heads, their judges and their officers*†; and they preſented themſelves before God. In this ſolemn aſſembly, the laſt he was to ſee, requeſting nothing for himſelf or his poſterity, but ſtrictly following the example of *Moſes*, who had in no reſpect exalted his own deſcendants above the reſt of the people; he expreſſes the ſtrongeſt ſolicitude for what he knew the public happineſs to

* Joſh. xix. 49, 50. † Chap. xxiv. 1.

to depend on; the preſervation of true religion, and conſequently of virtue, in oppoſition to the ſuperſtitious follies, and ſhocking vices, of the nations round them. To promote this end, the venerable chief recounts to them, by the eſpecial direction of heaven, the miraculous and gracious diſpenſations of providence, which their fathers and they had experienced, and he had been ſo long a conſtant eye-witneſs of; concluding the hiſtory with their preſent happy condition: and his inference from the whole is, *now therefore fear the Lord, and ſerve him, in ſincerity and in truth**. But being ſenſible, that mankind are ſtrangely apt not to think themſelves in a good ſtate, when they are in the beſt; he proceeds to intreat them, that if any are diſſatisfied with the fruits of obſerving their preſent religion and laws, they would conſider well, under what other, upon the whole, they would wiſh to be; for under ſome they muſt. They might, if they pleaſed, after all he had ſaid, try a change, and take the conſequences: but he had ſeen too much of the benefit of adhering to God, to have the leaſt deſire of experiencing what would be the effects of forſaking him: and his prayer and his endeavour ſhould be, that all under his influence might tread, for ever, in the ſame ſteps. *If it ſeem evil unto you to ſerve the Lord, chooſe you, this day, whom you will ſerve:——but as for me and my houſe, we will ſerve the Lord.*

In theſe words we have,

I. An intimation of the danger there is, that men may grow weary of true religion.

II. An admonition, that ſuch would think ſeriouſly what they propoſe to exchange it for: and what advantage they expect from thence.

III. The reſolution, which prudent men will make, whatever others do: to continue in the practice of it themſelves: and preſerve a conſcientious regard to it amongſt all that are placed under their inſpection.

I. An intimation of the danger there is, that a great part of the world may grow weary of religion, even whilſt it is taught in ſimplicity and truth.

Undoubtedly one of the ſtrongeſt prejudices againſt it hath ariſen from the abſurd, and often hurtful mixtures, with which, from

* Joſh. xxiv. 14.

from time to time, it hath been corrupted, either by miſtaken or deſigning men. Theſe have tempted many to reject the whole, good and bad promiſcuouſly; without ſeparating what was of God from what was of man. Now, were every thing elſe to be treated in this manner, not one of the righteſt principles of behaviour, or the moſt valuable bleſſings of life, could poſſible eſcape. For what is there on earth, that hath not been frequently miſunderſtood, perverted and abuſed, both by weakneſs and wickedneſs? It is therefore the groſſeſt partiality, not to diſtinguiſh in the caſe of religion, when we do it in every other: indeed, not to be as zealous for every real part of it, (for they are all highly uſeful) as againſt the corruptions it hath unhappily undergone. And yet, even in a country where it is the pureſt, ſome can allow themſelves to talk, as if it were fraud and impoſition throughout: can gratify their vanity, defend their vices, or ſerve their intereſts, by inſiſting confidently on the moſt groundleſs and exploded objections; ſometimes againſt all reverence to him who created them; often againſt the revelation he hath made to them: nay, can ſlight it as intirely, without being acquainted with the ſhadow of an objection, as if they had the ſtrongeſt in the world: think it a reaſon abundantly ſufficient, that they ſee others of good figure do ſo: and at laſt, perhaps, ſet themſelves to make it their ſcorn, without having once conſidered in earneſt, whether they ought not to have made it the rule and comfort of their lives.

This is going great lengths; yet not abſolutely the greateſt of all. For it hath happened too commonly, that thoſe very things, for which religion ought to be honoured moſt, have been the true cauſes of mens oppoſing and forſaking it. The *Jews*, for inſtance, were diſguſted with theirs, becauſe it was too ſpiritual and refined for them. We, indeed, who are bleſſed with one yet more ſo, may be tempted to find the contrary fault with that of *Moſes*. But think what the worſhip of the world was at that time: worſhip of the ſun, moon and ſtars; brute beaſts, ſtocks and ſtones; altars under every green tree, and upon every high hill; ceremonies numberleſs, unmeaning, immodeſt, inhuman. How prodigious a reformation was it then, to introduce, inſtead of theſe miſchievous abſurdities, the adoration of one only inviſible being, the maker

of all things; and the offering of ſacrifices to him in one only temple upon earth; with rites and obſervances, few in compariſon, and directly pointed againſt idolatry and ſuperſtition! But what was really the merit of their religion, was the ground of their clamour againſt it: *Make us gods to go before us**; let us have deities, that we can ſee and feel, to carry along with us; was the cry of the people: and whenever they forſook the Lord, it was for theſe more ſubſtantial objects of devotion. This may ſeem unaccountable enough; and yet, amongſt ourſelves, converts are frequently made to a communion, one of whoſe chief recommendations muſt be, that it ſtrikes the ſenſes, with images and formalities, pomp and ſhew.

But, as ſome are prejudiced againſt true religion for being too rational; many, it may be feared, are averſe to it for being too moral. As long as piety can be made, in any ſhape, conſiſtent with ſin; whether by truſting in faith without works, or ſubſtituting works of no value for thoſe of real value; or abounding in ſome one ſort of duties, inſtead of honeſtly practiſing every ſort; ſo long it may be borne with. But if the teachers of it will aſſert and prove, and attempt to convince mankind, that no one can be pious, without being uniformly virtuous; then there remains no poſſibility of compromiſing matters: but, if religion will give no quarter to vice, the vicious muſt give no quarter to religion: a very bad inducement, I own, but a very ſtrong one; and it deſerves careful reflection, whether a principal reaſon, why chriſtianity is now, more than ever, diſregarded, be not this; that now, more than ever, ſince the primitive ages, it is ſo preached, as to leave no room for being godly and wicked at once. But, however this be, there appears, in general, but too much danger, indeed but too much experience, that men may be tired even of true religion; that it may *ſeem evil unto them, to ſerve the Lord their God.* Therefore the text contains,

II. An admonition, that ſuch, as are diſpoſed to throw off the bonds of duty to their Maker, would think ſeriouſly, what ſort of change they are about to venture upon, and how they hope to be gainers by it.

No other courſe, that they can take, ſo much as promiſes any good with reſpect to a future ſtate: yet they muſt own there

* Exod. xxxii. 1,—23.

there may be one: nay, if God be either juſt, or wiſe, or good, or true, there will; and if there be, it is the moſt important intereſt we have, or can have, to be happy in it: yet nothing, but religion, provides againſt our being miſerable in it. A conſideration, which takes little time to expreſs; but very few ſpend enough in thinking of it; for what are the poor pleaſures of this ſhort life, compared with the joys or the pains of eternity? but even as to the preſent world, how much freedom ſoever bad men may effect, ſome maſter they muſt ſerve; ſome reſtraints they muſt be under, and ſome mortifications they muſt go through. Conſider the purſuits of the ſelfiſh and ambitious; are not they obliged to ſuppreſs their inclinations, and contradict their paſſions, in a thouſand inſtances, to carry the ſingle point of their worldly advantage? Conſider the indulgences of the voluptuous and intemperate, the ſallies and flights of the wild and extravagant: we are apt to ſay indeed, that they deny themſelves nothing: but is it true? Are there not multitudes of things, that all of them wiſh for, and cannot have: and ſtill greater multitudes, in proportion as they give their wiſhes a larger ſcope? Is any poſſible ſcheme of life to be carried on, without ſelf-denial in ſome thing or other? Or, if men can, and will, do juſt as they pleaſe at firſt; what comes of it? Is it not the perpetual conſequence, that they muſt ſuffer for it at laſt; and bear much the heavier burthen, after a time, becauſe they ſet out with the reſolution of bearing none?

If therefore every method, we can pitch on, hath at leaſt, either its reſtraints, or its ſufferings; and probably both: which are moſt reaſonable? which are moſt beneficial? Thoſe of religion and morals, or thoſe of the various maſters, which, on departing from religion and morals, we muſt obey? It concerns us highly, in ſuch a queſtion, not to flatter ourſelves, and take things for granted; nor to gueſs, and run the riſque, but to examine and chooſe: whereas the misfortune is, men enter upon a courſe, and follow it their whole lives, without ever deliberately chuſing it at all; *halting*, as the prophet expreſſes it, *between two opinions**, whilſt they proceed in one tenor of practice; and that, the wrong one. For the unſafe one is certainly the wrong: and, unleſs religion cannot be true, neither impiety, nor immorality, can be ſecure. Whoever therefore allows

* 1 Kings xviii. 21.

himſelf in either, ought beforehand to know very certainly, what is impoſſible to know (for we cannot know things to be true, which are falſe: firſt, that nothing remains to be hoped or feared in another life: and then, that wickedneſs bids faireſt for happineſs in this.

Too many indeed appear to think the latter point, at leaſt, a very clear one. But remember, the inquiry is not merely, what will afford us moſt pleaſure juſt at the preſent; or even for a few years; though it is ſeldom, that the vicious find reaſon to applaud their own conduct ſo long: but what will continue to pleaſe, what will give us the advantage upon the whole, taking inward ſatisfaction into the account, as well as outward gratifications; and not only delight us in the firſt and ſmalleſt part of the journey of life, but ſupport us in the remainder, that needs it moſt; and enable us to conclude it with comfort and credit. That abandoned wickedneſs cannot do this, every one, who thinks and obſerves, muſt ſee; and they who do not, will ſoon feel. Some therefore contrive to take a middle way: indulge themſelves beyond virtue, yet reſtrain themſelves ſhort of profligateneſs. And undoubtedly there would be leſs guilt in this, if it were not, that being ſo deliberately guilty is a great aggravation. There may alſo fewer worldly inconveniences follow from it: but ſtill, if great deviations from duty lead to great miſchiefs; the ſmaller muſt, in proportion, lead to ſome. And beſides, they who intended to go but a little out of the way, are almoſt always either invited, or driven, gradually farther and farther: and can never know before-hand, where they ſhall ſtop. Indeed what is there to ſtop them? deſires multiply and ſtrengthen. Duty is out of the queſtion. Prudence grows accuſtomed to ſubmit: perhaps falls low enough, to adviſe covering one ſin with another. What now ſhall keep ſuch perſons back from any crime? A principle of honour, it may poſſible be ſaid. And true honour, ſo far as it goes, is a noble principle indeed. It is uniform virtue, adorned with dignity of manners, with attention to every thing praiſe-worthy and amiable, and ſcorn of every thing baſe and mean; judging what is ſo, by reaſon and truth, not vulgar opinion. But the falſe honour of the vicious is an airy phantom, changeable as fancy and faſhion vary, that permits in multitudes of inſtances, and requires in ſome, the wickedeſt,

wickedeſt, the cruelleſt, the abſurdeſt behaviour; and ſets men up for objects of reſpect, that have no one good quality, merely becauſe they profeſs calling to account whoever ſhall fail of the regard they demand, or aſcribe to them any bad quality, which they do not care to own. It can never be, that ſo wretched a counterfeit as this ſhould be the guide of life. There is therefore none to be truſted to, if virtue be rejected; and virtue, without religion, neither is complete, nor will be effectual. If other ſuperiors and benefactors are intitled to reverence, God is. If outward expreſſions of reverence are to be ſhewn them, they are to be ſhewn him: both to preſerve it alive in our own minds, and to ſpread it around us. And if any expreſſions of it are due, thoſe which he hath appointed are due. Paying ſuch regard to God, joined with attendance on proper inſtruction, muſt naturally produce a ſerious care, to abſtain from every thing injurious, to do every thing beneficial, in human life; as not only our indiſpenſable obligation, but our moſt important intereſt. And what other motive can either extend ſo far, or influence ſo ſtrongly? If there be any need, that the world ſhould grow better, or not grow worſe; that men ſhould live together innocently and chearfully: have comfort under afflictions in this life, or look for eternal bleſſedneſs in the next: Principles of piety muſt be encouraged. Nay, could we poſſibly be content to give up all other advantages, there would ſtill remain other conſiderations of great weight on the ſame ſide. Though we may throw off religion ſo far as not to be governed by its precepts: we ſhall be afraid, on that very account, from time to time, extremely diſturbed by its threatnings: and the conſequence of not obeying them, children, will be dreading him as criminals. What then, and there a few profeſs to have got over theſe fears? Yet inwardly they know the contrary: or, however, they will know it when they leaſt think of it; or, could they be for ever more to experience them on earth, they will too ſurely find greater torments in hell, for having thus finally hardened their hearts. But mankind in general can never get over the fear of God. Some religion they muſt and will have: and the only queſtion is, whether it ſhall be a good one, or a falſe and bad one. *Joſhua* therefore puts the caſe to the *Jews* in a perfectly juſt light: *If it ſeem evil unto*

to you to ſerve the Lord, chooſe you whom you will ſerve: whether the gods which your fathers ſerved that were on the other ſide of the flood; or the gods of the Amorites, in whoſe land ye dwell. It is true the *Iſraelites* were prone to ſuperſtition: we are inclined to profaneneſs, and therefore may ſeem in no danger of the oppoſite extreme. But univerſal profaneneſs, and total unbelief, never ſubſiſted long any where, and never will: the world could not bear it: and the human mind hath a natural bent the other way. You have ſeen this in the caſe of the *Jews*. What was that of the Gentiles, when they forſook the truth? That *becauſe, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; they became vain in their imaginations, and their fooliſh heart was darkened*, till they *changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man, and birds, and four-footed beaſts, and creeping things*[*].

We of the preſent age indeed cannot well go thus far at once: but by how eaſy ſteps may we come to it! Were not our forefathers near it, but a little more than two hundred years ago; worſhipping, with more zeal than they did their Maker, images of pretended ſaints, many of whom had lived and died great ſinners, and addreſſing prayers to them in a language they did not underſtand? Now the ſame high road, that of popery, is open yet. And will not numbers be inclined to take it, if they can be perſuaded, from what they ſee, that the profeſſion of the proteſtant religion is the direct way to the profeſſion of no religion at all? When public worſhip and inſtruction are once deſerted, or attended on with viſible indifference and contempt; when perſons are taught nothing, and guarded againſt nothing; will they not of courſe be in danger of every thing? And have we not ſeducers amongſt us in every corner, trained up with the moſt artful ſubtlety, to work on the ignorance of ſome, the guilt of others, the private intereſt of a third ſort; to lead them over unto a communion, that hath corrupted the notions of piety, and weakened the bonds of moral obligation; done infinite miſchief to mankind by tyranny, perfidy and cruelty; and muſt be an eternal foe, whatever it may ſometimes pretend, to that happy eſtabliſhment of truth and liberty, which may God perſerve to us and ours?

Whoever

[*] Rom. i. 18,—24.

Whoever therefore hath a dread of ſuperſtition, bigotry and ſlavery, ſhould be zealous in the higheſt degree for pure religion, and if ever he would have his zeal effectual, muſt expreſs it in the ſame manner, that we find in the

IIId part of the text, the Jewiſh chief did; by reſolving hat, *whatever others do, he and his houſe will ſerve the Lord.*

Fear of ſingularity hath a moſt powerful influence on man- nd: and, in matters nearly indifferent, it is very uſeful that ſhould. But in points of importance; our concern is, to act we ought ourſelves, let thoſe around us act as they will: :e all the innocent care we can, neither to provoke their an- nor contempt; but ſtill do the right thing, and ſtand by preferring the teſtimony of our own hearts, that we deſerve robation, before receiving from men ever ſo much of it. eſpecially in religion, both reaſon and ſcripture dictate behaviour. And yet many, who can even affect to be lar in trifles and follies, have ſuch a cowardly fear of be- hought ſo in the caſe of ſeriouſly profeſſing religion, where uld be truly honourable, and they would in fact be ho- d for it, perhaps even by their preſent acquaintance, or at y better whom they might chuſe, and by the world in l; that, to avoid this imagined evil, they will incur the real ones, a guilty conſcience in this world, and the wrath r Maker in the next. If this be not contemptible weak- what is? And if it be, ſerving the Lord, let ever ſo few s true wiſdom.

then it muſt be obſerved, that, though every degree of : regard to God will produce to us proportionable be- nd preſerve us in ſome degree from ſufferings; yet the immortality, promiſed in the goſpel, can be attained, ere it is faithfully preached, eternal puniſhments can ed, only by obedience to the terms propoſed in the The doctrines, therefore, which God hath revealed ain or myſterious, muſt be received with humble faith; s he hath enjoined there, moral or poſitive, muſt be with pious reverence; and our hope of future hap- ſt be placed, not in the merit, either of our own good r without the grace of the Holy Spirit we cannot do f our own repentance, for being ſorry that we have ſinned

ſinned is not being innocent; but ſolely in the divine mercy through our Bleſſed Redeemer, who died for us that we might live to him. And, how much ſoever theſe rules may be overlooked or deſpiſed in the world, yet he hath repeatedly aſſured us with uncommon ſtrength of expreſſion, that our *not being aſhamed of him and his words*, of which theſe are part, is an indiſpenſable condition of his not being *aſhamed of us at the great day**.

But ſerving the Lord, as good chriſtians ourſelves, is not ſufficient, when we are intruſted with others alſo. Now, in ſome degree, we are intruſted with all who are placed under our influence, eſpecially if they be under our authority to: and God, with juſtice, expects every one to do the good, which he hath given him abilities for doing: for, conferring them, is the higheſt honour he can beſtow on his creatures; and uſing them, is the nobleſt way of at once obeying and reſembling our Creator. But, not to exceed the limits of domeſtic life, to which the text points our view: parents are, by nature and ſcripture, intruſted with their children: bound in conſcience to endeavour, that the being, which they have given them, prove not a miſerable one: bound in prudence to provide, that when they grow up, they may be a comfort and a credit to them, not a ſhame and a curſe. And yet, how commonly is the ornamental and ſuperficial part of their edacation the only one attended to! Perhaps a ſlight form of catechetical inſtruction, and a prayer or two are learnt by rote, as a taſk in their childhood, for mere form's ſake, and perhaps not: but, after that, very little care taken in teaching them rules of common prudence; leſs ſtill in giving them any conſiſtent principles of morals; none at all in binding them down to both, by a ſerious inward ſenſe of religion; of the purity of God's law; their depravity, and need of a Redeemer and Sanctifier; the importance of Chriſt's ordinances, without which, nothing will be inwardly, or often outwardly, ſuch as it ought: and then, at laſt, either great ſurprize and anger is expreſſed, at their coming out, what it muſt be expected they ſhould: or elſe their ruin is ſtupidly acquieſced in, as unavoidable from the beginning: and men ſit down contented, that they who are neareſt, and ought to be deareſt to them, ſhall be wicked, and wretched,

* Mark viii. 38.

wretched, and deſpicable; or, however they eſcape here, undone to eternity.

But not only our children ſhould be led to eſteem and practiſe the obligations of piety, but our ſervants and dependants. We cannot indeed force them to it, and we need not. But we can give them opportunity, and advice, and encouragement: we can remove the obſtinately bad, to preſerve the reſt: we can put the inſtruction of good books in their way: we can call them to family-devotions, from the lamentable omiſſion of which duty, a very great part of our ſins and follies proceeds; and we can likewiſe bring ſome of them at one time, and ſend the reſt at another, to the houſe of God. It is very true, praying and reading at home, and going to church, are neither the whole nor the main of their duty; and they will be faithfully and ſo, when they come here. But theſe are parts of the firſt and great commandment, regard to him that made us; and they are ſuch parts as, if they neglect, they will too eaſily think they may as well neglect the reſt. Moſt of them would be glad of this kind attention to them; all of them would refuſe us for it: and were ever ſo many of them indifferent about it, or worſe, ought it to be an affair indifferent to us? Can poor, ignorant, thoughtleſs creatures come to live under our roof; is it chriſtian, is it human, to let them go on, as they will, to their own deſtruction of body and ſoul? They contribute a great deal to our happineſs: why ſhould we contribute, ſince we ſo eaſily may, in this important thing to theirs? But indeed, is not our own, preſent as well as future, deeply concerned in it too? Our eaſe, our characters, fortunes, our lives, depend on the honeſty, the veracity, the piety, the diligence, of thoſe about us. And what can theſe qualities in them ſo well, as their being perſuaded, that God requires them at their hands, and will treat them, as they treat us? Were this motive weaker than it is, no real chriſtian ought to be deſpiſed. Loud complaints of the ill-behaviour of the lower part of the world, are made continually; but do they leave the upper part to thank for it but themſelves, if they use no care to prevent or mend it? With the beſt care, they happen too frequently; but, without it, what elſe can

the whole, it is aſtoniſhing, that any, who pretend to care, can fail to endeavour, that their children and ſervants

may be religious; when not a few, confeſſedly bad, take ſuch precautions as they can to make them better than they are willing to be themſelves. And undoubtedly this is very prudent, ſo far as it goes. But, as the prudence of ſuch people is throughout eſſentially defective, ſo this inſtance of it, ordinarily ſpeaking, can go but a very little way. For what likelihood is there, that a few right exhortations, or directions, from the head of a family, will make the members of it modeſt and ſober, juſt and regular: while his example authorizes them to be lewd and intemperate, unjuſt and diſorderly? Or that ſending them to church will teach them to reverence God; whilſt, perhaps, the table-talk that they hear daily, teaches them to deſpiſe him? Our conduct therefore muſt be all of a piece; elſe we ſhall neither ſucceed, nor will it avail us to our own eternal happineſs, if we do. But let us firſt reſolve to ſerve God ourſelves; and then we may inſiſt, that they who belong to us ſhall, both with a good grace, and good hope of his bleſſing: to which we cannot acquire a ſtronger title, than by that method, which procured, as we read in ſcripture, to the father of the faithful and his deſcendants, a benediction ſo diſtinguiſhed, both temporal and ſpiritual: *Abraham ſhall ſurely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth ſhall be bleſſed in him. For I know him, that he will command his children and his houſhold after him, and they ſhall keep the way of the Lord, to do juſtice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that, which he hath ſpoken of him*[*].

[*] Gen. xviii. 18, 19.

SER-

SERMON LV.

Of Love to God as the First and Great Commandment.

MATT. xxii. 37, 38.

Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

THESE words contain the former part of our blessed Lord's answer to the question, *master, which is the great commandment in the law?* It was put to him by one of the Scribes or lawyers, the authorized instructors of the people, *tempting him*: that is, designing to make trial of his knowledge, and the soundness of his doctrine. For the man's intention plainly appears to have been no worse than this, from his immediate approbation of our Saviour's judgement; and the gracious assurance he received in return, that *he was not far from the kingdom of God*, as we read in the parallel place of St. Mark*.

Which of the commandments is the greatest, may seem to us a question of more curiosity than importance: because undoubtedly the least, as well as the greatest, ought to be observed. Yet still it was a point of some consequence in itself: since two precepts might interfere; and men be obliged to omit one in order to obey the other: now in such cases it was material to know, which they should prefer. But the notions entertained amongst the *Jews* increased the necessity of a right decision of this doubt†. They divided the injunctions of the law, as appears from their books yet remaining, into weighty and

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* Mark xii 34. † Vid. Schoetgenii Hor. Heb. & Talm. in loc.

light ones. The former, they held, a man muſt keep ſtrictly, *if he would enter into life** eternal: but the latter, ſome of them affirmed, had only a ſmall recompence belonging to them, and that in this world; ſo that a man might neglect them, one Rabbi ſaith, *trample upon them*, without much danger. Nay, there were teachers of conſiderable reputation amongſt them, who aſſerted, that God had given his people ſo great a number of precepts with this view, that, by obſerving any one, meaning probably any of the weighty ones, they might obtain ſalvation†. This was very bad: but their opinions, which were the weighty ones, made it worſe yet. Some inſiſted that theſe alone were weighty, the tranſgreſſors of which, it was expreſsly threatened in the law, ſhould be cut off; and all the reſt light. Some held the third commandment, ſome the fifth, ſome the obſervation of the ſabbath, ſome that of circumciſion, to be the weightieſt. In our Saviour's time, it ſeems by the reply which the Scribe made him, that ſacrificing was commonly thought the principal article of the law. And indeed, many paſſages, not only in the goſpels, but in the prophets, evidently ſhew, that the nation in general were fond of exalting the ceremonial precepts above the moral ones, becauſe they found them leſs diſagreeable. In themſelves, it muſt be owned, the former were a heavy yoke, though in their circumſtances it had long been a needful one. But to bad men nothing is ſo heavy, as reforming their hearts and lives. It is true, their ſacrifices, and all their obſervances, rightly interpreted, required this in order to their final acceptance with God. But the outward act being a matter of great form and punctuality, and ſometimes expence too, they eaſily perſuaded themſelves of what they had a great mind to believe, that a ſcrupulous performance of ſuch troubleſome and ſhewiſh duties would certainly be ſufficient, whatever their inward diſpoſitions and common behaviour might be. Yet, at the ſame time, the *Eſſenes*, no inconſiderable ſect amongſt them, though affecting privacy, and probably therefore not appearing in the hiſtory of the goſpels, ran into the contrary extreme: and, profeſſing great ſanctity of manners, omitted the temple-ſacrifices intirely‡.

In

* Matth. xix. 18. † Pocock on Hoſ. xiv. 2. cites this from Ikarim, l. iii. c. 29. ‡ Philo, liber quiſquis virtuti ſtudet, vol. ii. p. 457. ed. Mang. Joſeph. Ant. l. xviii. c. 1.

In such a state of things as this, it was natural to ask the sentiments of so remarkable a teacher as our blessed Lord: and very important, both for the instruction of the people and for his own character, that he should declare them. Undoubtedly he had now a fair opportunity of securing the applause of the multitude and their leaders, by an answer suitable to the notions in vogue; instead of gaining, as he did, by contradicting them, only the single approbation of one good man. But *for this cause came he into the world, that he should bear witness of the truth**: which yet he did with such prudence, as never to prejudice the least part of it in his zeal for the greatest. When he blamed the Scribes and Pharisees for preferring the minutest ritual observances to *the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith*, he added immediately, *these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone*†. In the text he proceeds with the same caution: and, well knowing how prone men are to draw false consequences from the truest doctrines, not content with deciding *which was the first and great commandment*, he assures them that the second, a very comprehensive one, was of the same nature and obligation with it: for yet fuller security, subjoins a declaration, that, though these were subordinate, yet with these were connected, whatever things else the scripture hath required. *Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment*‡. *And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* Here then we have the whole system of our duty, standing on its proper foundation, and exhibited to our view in its natural order: beginning with the love of God, proceeding to the love of our fellow-creatures, and perfected in a careful attention to every relation, every kind office owing to either; which we cannot pay, without a virtuous government of ourselves.

The love of God is the subject to be explained at present: which I shall do by shewing,

I.

* xviii. 37. † Matth. xxiii 23. ‡ Aben Ezra saith, the love of God is the root of all the commandments. Buxt. Floril. p. 278.

I. Its nature.

II. The importance of it in point of duty.

III. Its influence on our happineſs.

IV. The methods which infinite wiſdom hath employed, to cultivate it in our minds.

I. Its nature.

Various affections cannot fail to ariſe in our hearts from contemplating the attributes and actions of our Maker. His eternity and preſence every where muſt needs raiſe in us wonder and aſtoniſhment. His unbounded power and knowledge, beſides increaſing this greatly, muſt alſo fill us with apprehenſions, that our happineſs or miſery depends on his conduct towards us. But there is no determinate ground in all this for being either pleaſed or ſorry. If then we conſider next, that the ſame being is perfectly juſt and righteous, this immediately gives us abſolute ſecurity, ſo far as we are innocent; and great comfort, that he, who can do all things, will do only what is equitable. It gives us fear indeed, with reaſon, in caſes where we are conſcious, as in multitudes we all are, of ill deſert. But ſuch dread, even in the guiltieſt of men, muſt be accompanied with a real, though unwilling, approbation of the character: and the penitent concern of better minds will be attended with reverent eſteem. Yet, were we to ſtop here, our veneration for God would be incomplete, becauſe there ſtill remains a more valuable and engaging quality than any that we have hitherto been aſcribing to him. But let us advance one ſtep further: and place before our eyes the univerſal bounty and mercy of our heavenly Father, proved by the plaineſt reaſon, experienced in the works of his creation and the courſe of his providence; but exerciſed moſt fully beyond compariſon in the unſpeakable bleſſing of our redemption, and revealed to us moſt plainly in the declarations of his holy word: then, if our ſouls have any feeling, there will ſpring up in them, lively ſentiments of complacency, of gratitude, of love. And when once goodneſs hath made the impreſſion, every other perfection of his nature will both ſtrengthen it inexpreſſibly, by enabling him to do us continually all poſſible acts of kindneſs, and at the ſame time regulate it duly, by a proper temperature of that awful reſpect, with which our tendereſt affections towards *the high and holy one, that inhabiteth eternity**, ought ever to be intimately mixed.

Such

* Iſai. lvii. 15.

Such then is the love of God. And as our ſenſe of the divine excellence cannot be too ſtrong, but muſt indeed at the beſt fall infinitely ſhort of what he deſerves; we are commanded to love him *with all our heart, with all our ſoul, and with all our mind;* that is, with the utmoſt exertion of our inward powers. Not that we are to confine our whole affection to him: for it follows, *thou ſhalt love thy neighbour as thyſelf.* Whatever hath any thing amiable in any degree, we ought, as far as we can, to eſteem in proportion: and conſequently him beyond expreſſion moſt, who hath in the higheſt degree poſſible every thing that can appear amiable to our rational faculties, duly exerciſed. All objects therefore are to be excluded ſo far as attachments to them would be inconſiſtent with devotedneſs to our Maker. Now the worſhip of falſe deities is peculiarly inconſiſtent with it. And for that reaſon the love of God, when preſcribed to the *Jews* in the Old Teſtament, is uſually explained by adhering to him with conjugal fidelity, (for under that image it is often expreſſed) in oppoſition to his rivals, the idols of the nations; and not dividing themſelves, as they were extremely apt to do, between *Jehovah* and them. But if, inſtead of theſe idols, we *ſet up* any others *in our hearts**; make unlawful pleaſure, power, profit, reſentment, our deities; this alſo is an evident breach of the faith which we have vowed to our ſovereign gracious Lord. Nay, if we value the moſt allowable objects of deſire ſo highly, as to forget or think little of the ſupreme God, we ſtill incur the ſame kind of guilt. For we ought to conſider whatever we have cauſe to love beſt, as beſtowed on us by his hand; and therefore as a motive to love him above all, *from whom every good and perfect gift cometh down*†. To ſay indeed, that we ought to love it in this view only, as coming from him, would be going too far: becauſe, had we been ignorant of God, moſt things, that deſerve our liking now, would in their degree have deſerved it then. But ſtill, the more we attend to the goodneſs of God in every thing, without neglecting the inferior attentions to which he hath bound us, the nearer we approach towards being what we ought.

And further, the more affectionate this regard to him on all occaſions is, the better it will ſuit, not only the words of the commandment, but the dictates of reaſon itſelf: which clear-

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* Ezek. xiv. 3. † James i. 17.

ly teaches, that the warmeſt piety is due to the Author of all our enjoyments. But then it muſt be obſerved, however, that love to a being intirely ſpiritual cannot, ordinarily ſpeaking, raiſe in us thoſe perceptions of animal fervour, which earthly paſſions can: nor ought we to eſteem ourſelves upon them, if we had them. For experience proves, that very bad men may feel at times high raptures of this kind; and very good men may ſcarce ever feel any thing of them: ſo much do they depend on conſtitution. Far therefore from affecting ſuch emotions, when we really have them not; which is a ſort of hypocriſy, whether ſhewn before men, or in the preſence of God alone; we ought not to be too earneſt in our wiſhes for them. If he gives them, we are to be thankful: if he with-holds them, it is either for our needful correction, or, perhaps, our true inward improvement. And by labouring to work ourſelves up to them, nay, by merely indulging them when our natural frame inclines us powerfully towards them, we may be quite bewildered and loſt in unmeaning or injudicious tranſports, little or nothing akin to that ſublime duty, of which they would put on the appearance. But ſtill leſs ought it to be confounded, as it often hath been, with a blind, or what is worſe yet, a bitter vehemence of religious zeal. For the moſt ardent devotion, ſo far as it either produces injuſtice or indifference to our brethren, or proceeds from unworthy conceptions of God, is indeed by no means the love of him, but of a phantom of our own imagination, placed in his ſtead. And the real and only teſt of the genuineneſs and ſtrength of this divine affection in our breaſts, is the unvaried conſtancy of a ſincere and reverent delight in the Father and Lord of all, as the perfecteſt, and beſt, and moſt beneficent of beings; expreſſed in humble and hearty praiſe and thankſgiving, in a ſtudious imitation of him, and a chearful obedience to him.

The next thing to be laid before you is,

II. The importance of cheriſhing and acting from this principle, in point of duty.

Moſt people ſeem to think, that what they are pleaſed to call moral behaviour, though perhaps in ſome points groſsly immoral, is their whole duty. Others, who have ſome notion of piety, carry it little further than attending public worſhip, more or leſs frequently, perhaps with very little thought of what

what they are about. Some, who make a conſcience of private prayer alſo, it may be doubted, neither feel, nor endeavour to feel, much of the good things they ſay in it. Or, whatever ſenſe a few may have of the fear of God, they have uſually none almoſt of love to him. Any real experience of that affection, they have heard ſo often treated, even by profeſſedly ſerious chriſtians, as mere enthuſiaſm, that they are apprehenſive of danger from it. The ſcripture doth indeed enjoin it: and ſo they will bear with the mention of it in diſcourſes from the pulpit, provided it be paſſed over ſlightly, or interpreted away to juſt nothing: elſe they conceive it to be at beſt intirely ſupererogation; and leave it accordingly with all their hearts to ſuch as chuſe to have more religion than they need.

And, it muſt be confeſſed, this way of thinking hath received too much countenance from the indiſcreet and extravagant manner in which the ſubject hath been ſometimes handled. But ſurely, explained as you have heard it now, there can be nothing more reaſonable, or of greater moment. If we have any principle of goodneſs in ourſelves, that muſt lead us to eſteem and love it in others. Now in God is perfect goodneſs: and therefore not to eſteem and love him, is to be void of right affection towards that being who deſerves it infinitely the moſt. Our duty conſiſts in ſuch behaviour as the relations of things require of us. To whom then are our firſt and moſt important relations? Are they not evidently to our Maker, preſerver, and gracious benefactor, to our ſovereign Lord, and final judge? Other claims, however like in their nature, muſt be unſpeakably inferior in their degree to his. What ſort of morality then is that, which dwells only on the tranſitory obligations of men one to another, and overlooks the eternal bonds, which tie us, *ſo long as we have our being**, to him, *of whom, and through whom, and to whom, are all things*†? The regards that we owe him, indeed, are numerous; and vary in ſome meaſure as our ſpiritual ſtate doth. But ſtill, as goodneſs, though combined with other attributes, was in the beginning the active principle in the mind of God, and ever prevails through all his diſpenſations: ſo is love, though occaſionally aſſociated with other movements of ſoul, the original and uni-

* Pſ. civ. 33. † Rom. xi. 36.

verſal affection, due to him from all his rational creatures: or, in our Saviour's words, *the firſt and great commandment.*

Suppoſe, in the mutual intercourſes of this world, any one ſhould value, as he ought, a perſon of but low deſert; and yet be inſenſible to much higher merit, well known to him, in another; ſhould be duly grateful to the former for favours, not worth naming in compariſon with thoſe which the latter had done him, and yet ſhould leave him and all his kindneſs out of his thoughts: would not ſuch a turn of mind be very wrong and criminal? Would not ſuch an excellent and beneficent perſon be very unequally and unjuſtly treated? Yet this is exactly the common behaviour of mankind. Here we live amongſt poor imperfect creatures, like ourſelves. We receive a few ſmall benefits from ſome of them, and ſee a little glimmering of goodneſs in others; and ſhould be very blameable, if we did not feel and expreſs a proper eſteem for them, on account of both. Now there is at the ſame time, not only within our knowledge, but ever moſt intimately preſent with us, a being of inconceivable perfection and lovelineſs; from whoſe bounty we and this whole univerſe have received our very exiſtence, and every capacity of enjoyment that belongs to it; by whoſe continual ſupport we are upheld in life; whoſe grace excites us to every thing good; whoſe forbearance paſſes over our daily tranſgreſſions; nay, *who hath commended his love towards us, in that, while we were yet ſinners, Chriſt*, his only Son, *died for us, that, being juſtified by his blood, we might be ſaved from wrath*, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God†.* What then have we cauſe to think of ourſelves, if we love not him, who himſelf *is love‡*; if ſuch acts of kindneſs make none or faint impreſſions on our hearts; if we reflect but ſeldom upon them, and are influenced but little by them? Is there, or can there be, an inſtance of ingratitude from man to man, that bears the leaſt proportion to the unworthineſs of ſuch a temper? For that God hath no need of our aknowledgments, as our fellow-creatures often have, only proves his goodneſs to be the greater; and therefore ought not ſurely to make our ſenſe of it the leſs. Now, if theſe things are thus evident to our view, in how much ſtronger a light muſt they appear to his

* Rom. v. 8, 9. † Ver. 2. ‡ 1 John iv. 8.

his all-ſeeing eye? And with what diſlike and indignation muſt he look on ſo ſhocking a depravity, as that of refuſing him the very affection, which he purpoſely and principally formed us to exerciſe towards himſelf, its moſt deſerving, its only adequate object? For, as all that in a moral ſenſe is good in his whole creation, is but the ſhadow of divine perfection; ſo the eſteem and love of what is good muſt ever be eſſentially defective, till it leads us to, and terminates in the love of him.

But let us now conſider alſo the effects of this principle on other parts of our duty. We muſt ſet our hearts on ſomething. Worldly things are all of them trifles. Many of them are not to be attained, but by unlawful means: however attained, fondneſs for them debaſes and corrupts us. We ſee and feel it every day; all the wickedneſs that prevails on earth ſprings from it. Therefore, to avoid this danger, men have been directed to fix their attention on the rightneſs, the amiableneſs of virtue: and right and amiable it is, no queſtion. But, without having recourſe to unhappy experience, the plaineſt reaſon ſhews, how weakly and how tranſiently the bare idea, the abſtract notion, of moral excellence muſt affect ſuch creatures, ſurrounded with ſuch temptations as we are, compared with an affectionate regard to him, in whom the fulneſs of it dwells, and overflows on all the works of his hands. Every ſort, indeed, of regard to God, is a more powerful incitement to virtue, than any other motive: but love hath a peculiar force; often in beginning a change from evil to good, but always in carrying it on, and compleating it. While we obey only from fear of him, we are unwilling and backward, imagine difficulties, contrive excuſes; and think it a point gained, if we can perſuade ourſelves, that this or that needs not to be done. If hope be added to it, without any inducement more generous, we ſhall ſtill be in danger of aiming to get our reward by doing as little for it as we can. But thoſe, whom we love, we ſerve with alacrity and zeal; forget our own inclinations to adopt theirs, hate every thing that diſpleaſes them, deſpiſe every thing that doth not recommend us to them, look on their commands as favours and honours, rejoice to encounter difficulties for their ſakes, and think we can never do enough to teſtify our attachment to them. What noble improvements then muſt

love to God make in the performance of our duty; and how can it fail,

III. Of increaſing our happineſs, even in this world, as well as the next?

For want of cultivating this delightful affection, the thoughts of him are dreadful to the generality of men. Too many are tempted to wiſh in their hearts, if they durſt, that he were not, or had no regard to human conduct: and if any of them can but perſuade themſelves for a while, on the ſtrength of ſome poor cavil, to hope what they wiſh, they triumph in the imagined diſcovery, that ſets them ſo much at eaſe. From the ſame default, humbler and righter minds conſider him very often in no better light, than as a rigid lawgiver, arbitrarily exacting a number of almoſt impracticable duties, and inforcing them with the dread of inſupportable puniſhments: whence they are ready to ſink under the terrors of religion, even while they are conſcientiouſly fulfilling its precepts. Looking on God as the object of love would rectify theſe miſtaken conceptions intirely. We ſhould all ſee and feel, that a being of infinite goodneſs, directed by infinite wiſdom, is the higheſt bleſſing; and the want of ſuch a one would be the greateſt calamity, that is poſſible: we ſhould be ſatisfied, that the ſtricteſt of his laws, and the ſevereſt of their ſanctions, are means which he knows to be needful for our good; that his mercy will forgive on repentance our paſt tranſgreſſions of them, that his grace will ſtrengthen us to keep them better, and that he will never reject a ſoul affectionately devoted to him. In proporion then as we are ſo, all terrifying apprehenſions will vaniſh from us. *There is no fear in love*, ſaith St. *John; fear hath torment; but perfect love, caſteth out fear**.

Another ſort of men there is, who have not much uneaſineſs, but little or no pleaſure in religion. What they call performing their devotions, is commonly nothing more than going heavily through a few cuſtomary ſhews of reſpect, and repeating by rote a certain number of good words, without any life, or almoſt any meaning. No wonder, if the benefit of ſuch worſhip ſeems to be ſo ſmall, that more than a few, whoſe conſciences would not ſuffer them to neglect it, cannot however help

* 1 John iv. 18.

help conſidering it as a burthenſome taſk, enjoined them, they ſcarce know why. But were theſe forms and ſhadows turned into ſubſtance, by the real exerciſe of that devout affection which is profeſſed in them, we ſhould none of us any longer think hardly or meanly of the higheſt and happieſt employment of the human ſoul. We ſhould be filled with pleaſing reverence in doing homage to the gracious Lord of all, celebrate his perfections as intereſted in every one of them, give eaſe to our hearts by a penitent confeſſion of our offences, make our claim to his promiſed mercy with moſt joyful gratitude, vow to him chearfully a more vigilant obedience, feel a double ſatisfaction in every comfort from having received it as his gift, and diſburthen ourſelves of every anxiety, by committing to his providence all our wants, and all our cares.

Every other love may cauſe the acuteſt miſery. The object our tendereſt earthly regards may be inſenſible or ungrateful; may prove many ways inferior to our expectation; may wretched, and make us ſo; may be ſnatched away on a len for ever. But love to God is ſubject to no diſappointt; is indeed a cure for all that can poſſibly happen to

While we *ſet our affection on things above**, the chief are of our ſoul muſt ever be ſafe: even *thoſe things*, that to be the moſt *againſt us*†, we are expreſsly aſſured, are *ing together* all the while *for our good*‡: and the more of nferior enjoyments God requires us to ſacrifice to him, the opportunities he gives us of manifeſting that ſupreme for him, which he ſeldom fails to reward amply here, uſing into us a ſenſe of his favour, greatly ſuperior to all y pleaſure; but at leaſt *he hath prepared* in heaven *m that love him, things which eye hath not ſeen, nor ear neither have entered into the heart of man*§.

ed, how large a part, that love itſelf, which we have ed inviolate through the trials of life, will then make elicity; when we ſhall be raiſed above all our preſent cts of deſire, and have every faculty of our ſouls adapbrace the only worthy one; when we ſhall experience ediate beatific preſence, feel joys unutterable, flowing from him, and be compleatly aſſured, that *this God d for ever and ever*‖; how tranſporting, the move-

ments

* Col. iii. 2. † Gen. xlii. 36. ‡ Rom. viii. 28.
§ 1 Cor. ii. 9. ‖ Pſ. xlviii. 14.

ments of our affections towards him may then become, is not for us now to say or conceive. But so much apprehension of it we must surely have, as will shew that our most important interest lies in forming ourselves to that disposition of heart towards him in this life, which is necessary to our blessedness in the next. For the principal felicity of heaven consists in God: and unless we love him, we cannot enjoy him, or be happy with him.

Let us therefore proceed to consider,

IV. The methods which infinite wisdom hath taken to cultivate so excellent a principle in our minds.

Love owes its being to goodness; and so may be produced, either by a general contemplation of its amiableness, or by favours personally received from it. That we are capable of the former and purer sort of love, delight in a benevolent character, though we have never been benefited by it, nor possibly can be, is a truth of which every day gives proofs with respect to our fellow-creatures, whom we affectionately esteem, though inaccessibly distant from us, though dead many ages before us. And therefore we are doubtless capable also of admiring and adoring the infinitely superior benevolence of our Creator, abstracted from the thought of our own sharing in it; as indeed we surely all of us love him for his bounty to the rest of the world, as well as to ourselves. But then, this mere disinterested affection, though natural to our hearts, is very weak and languid there, in the midst of so many other passions and appetites, as our condition upon earth makes necessary for us, and the original depravity and superadded evil customs of mankind have so unhappily strengthened and perverted. Our hearts are pre-engaged and filled up, for the most part, with temporal, it is well if not with criminal, objects of desire, long before we come seriously to reflect on the spiritual and truly valuable one. Nor, when we do, can mere speculative meditation upon that be expected to prevail over the importunate calls which we have to other attentions: but experience of his bounty must be added, to invigorate esteem by gratitude. And plentifully it is added by our heavenly Father in his works of nature and of grace. *O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness, and declare the wonders which he doth*

for

for the children of men * ; that *they would love him, becauſe he firſt loved us* †! But benefits received are ſoon forgotten: and whatever thankful warmth they may raiſe, while the reliſh of them is freſh and lively, cools and flattens; till, by long poſſeſſion, we grow apt to think every thing that we enjoy our due; and feel nothing in relation to it but diſcontent, if any part is taken away or diminiſhed. Knowing this, our indulgent Maker, that he may attract us more powerfully to himſelf, hath joined with the experience of preſent mercies, the hope of unſpeakably greater to come: and *bleſſed is he whoſe hope is in the Lord his God* ‡. For though it be a leſs noble, becauſe more ſenſible, paſſion, yet, in the preſent caſe, it partakes conſiderably of ſomething moral and religious. Any real deſire of heavenly joys muſt imply a degree of love, both to virtue and holineſs, in which it will chiefly conſiſt, and to that holy being who hath promiſed to beſtow it. But alas! worldly and ſinful contentments debaſe mens natures, that they cannot aſpire to, or earneſtly wiſh for, any thing great and excellent. And therefore the wiſe ruler of the world hath enforced his laws by the only remaining motive, fear: that they, whom nothing else will influence, may at leaſt be influenced by conſidering preſent ſufferings and future miſery, awaiting wickedneſs: a ſervile and ſlaviſh inducement, it muſt be owned: but however a good ſign in him who acts upon it, as it ſhews him not inflexibly obſtinate in what is evil. And, remote as it may ſeem from that generous flame which our Maker ſeeks to kindle in our breaſts, yet the ſon of *Sirach* hath juſtly ſaid, that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of his*

in the firſt place, can with peculiar efficacy reſtrain forward actions of men, and keep them from adding to bad inclinations by indulgence. Fear, eſpecially of that ſhament which they know they deſerve, can make their pleaſures come taſteleſs and unpleaſant to them. And when they are brought to avoid forbidden gratifications as hurtful: it is a fair proſpect, that not only virtuous behaviour will recommend itſelf, as almoſt every thing doth, by cuſtom, but

* Pſ. cxvii. 21. † 1 John iv. 19. ‡ Pſ. cxlvi. 4.
§ Ecclus. xxv. 12. See Philo de Abrahamo, p. 19 ed. Mangey: and the large Quotation from Maimonides, in Humphrey's Diſſ. on Repentance, prefixed to this tranſlation of Athenagoras, p. 52, &c.

but that alſo its intrinſic fitneſs and beauty will come to be perceived, and awaken ſuitable affections. Or, if this be already the caſe, and yet vehement temptations hurry men on to ſin; (a very common and very pitiable condition) fear may be ſo impreſſed on the heart from above, as to overbalance theſe; free the rational principle from the oppreſſion under which it labours, and enable it to reſume its rightful dominion. Then the conduct will be reformed, the view of things gradually brighten, and the more ingenuous affections of hope and gratitude, and unmixed love, ſpring up and flouriſh; till at length our duty and our Maker, which at firſt we regarded unwillingly, on mere compulſion, will no longer have need of any other force than their own native attraction, to regulate every thought of our ſouls, and every action of our lives.

Thus then appears the wiſdom and the goodneſs of thoſe various methods which God hath taken to unite us finally to himſelf. He hath planted in our hearts that pure and diſintereſted eſteem and love of moral perfection, which leads directly to the eſteem and love of him above all; and without which we ſhould not have been ſuſceptible of genuine piety and virtue. But having placed us, with a nature prone to go wrong, in a world full of inticements, he hath not left us to the guidance of this one principle, which, though the beſt in itſelf, would have proved inſufficient for our direction; but hath kindly put us under the tutorage of ſubordinate affections, *to train us up in the way wherein we ſhould go* *, till we become enlightened enough *to approve the things that are excellent* †, and animated enough to purſue them for their own ſakes. Let us therefore give up ourſelves without ſcruple to the influence of every motive to our duty, which reaſon or ſcripture ſets before us, of pleaſure or terror, of this world or the next, and by reading, meditation and prayer, imprint them ſtrongly on our minds: nor be at all dejected, though perhaps as yet the leaſt worthy of them hath the largeſt ſhare in our obedience; as probably it hath for a time in that which moſt children pay to their earthly parents, for whoſe perſons and precepts, notwithſtanding, they acquire, by inſenſible ſteps, the moſt dutiful and tender eſteem. But whoever would ſtrengthen within himſelf this bleſſed diſpoſition towards God, muſt

* Prov. xxii. 6. † Phil. i. 10.

muſt frequently recollect and inculcate the conviction, that other incitements are but the means, and *love the end of the commandment* *; that we improve and grow inwardly better under the heavenly diſcipline, only in proportion as we advance in unfeigned affection, and are transformed by it into real likeneſs to the ſupreme good. Open your hearts therefore to feel his goodneſs towards yourſelves, and imitate it towards your brethren. *For God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him* †.

* 1 Tim. i. 5. † 1 John iv. 16.

SERMON LVI.

Of the Love of our Neighbour.

MATTH. xxii. 39.

And the ſecond is like unto it, thou ſhalt love thy neighbour as thyſelf.

THIS is the latter part of our Saviour's anſwer to the queſtion, *which is the great commandment in the law?* He had already anſwered ſufficiently, by ſaying, it was the love of God. But moſt of the *Jews*, before whom he ſpoke, thought the beſt proof of their fulfilling that duty, was a ſcrupulous exactneſs in ſome, or all, of the ceremonial precepts that God had enjoined them. And on the merit of this, they indulged themſelves in great hardneſs of heart, even towards their brethren of the ſame religion; and in utter diſregard, if not implacable hatred, of all who were of a different religion, perhaps of a different ſect only. So that, if he had carried his reply no further, his hearers, *who had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge* *, would in all probability have underſtood him according to their own preconceived notions: and never have ſuſpected him of deſigning to condemn their ſuperſtition and uncharitableneſs. Therefore he immediately ſubjoins, from the expreſs words of *Moſes* †, another commandment, which, if they miſinterpreted the firſt, might ſhew them their miſtake; and if they did not, would plainly appear, to any conſiderate perſon, *like unto it* in its nature, and ſecond in its dignity and uſe: *Thou ſhalt love thy neighbour as thyſelf.* But this alſo the *Jews* contrived to explain in a wrong manner, that they might gratify wrong inclinations. For which reaſon he took an opportunity to ſet them right. And, beſides the *Jews*,

* Rom. x. 2. † Lev. xix. 18.

les of others, both before and ever ſince, have done
thing. Nay ſome, not content with perverting, and
ying, have directly found fault with it.

whoever believes in a wiſe and good ruler of the world,
ieve it to be his will, that humanity ſhould be prac-
ongſt men: and whoever feels in himſelf kind affec-
uſt think the exerciſe of them his duty. But then
e raiſed, who are entitled to our kindneſs, and in what
both which points therefore the precept, now before
y determines. And I ſhall explain and vindicate its
ations, by ſhewing you the meaning, *firſt*, of the word
; *ſecondly*, of the expreſſion, *loving him as ourſelves*:
ing in ſome meaſure all the way, but principally at
uſion, the reaſonableneſs and neceſſity of having ſo
ard for ſo many as the text requires.

neighbour then commonly ſignifies in ſcripture, and
m in heathen writers, every perſon who is placed
r reach and influence. Accordingly St. *Paul*, inſtead
he that loveth his neighbour, ſaith, *he that loveth
hath fulfilled the law**. We have uſually the moſt
opportunities of doing good to thoſe who live with
r us. But if any one, however diſtant from us, or
to us, particularly wants our help, he is, in effect,
ry thing, brought near us for the time, and put un-
re. God's benevolence is abſolutely univerſal: ours
extended as far as it can: and the extent of mens
ng extremely various and uncertain; (for the mean-
may ſometimes, by one ſingle diſcovery, do more
rvice to mankind, than the greateſt monarch is capa-
e word *neighbour* hath this peculiar advantage, and
propriety, that it contracts or enlarges its ſignifica-
s the caſe demands; and either takes in the extremi-
globe, or confines itſelf to our own home.

ave carried their public-ſpiritedneſs too far: and pi-
nſelves on manifeſting good-will to their fellow-
by undertakings out of their province, and even be-
abilities; while their proper neighbours, thoſe with
ey had cloſe connections, and their proper buſineſs,
their circumſtances bound them to mind, were diſ-
an injudicious conduct, when it proceeds from the

* Rom. xiii 8.

beſt intentions; but highly blameable, if vanity, or a meddling temper, be the ſource of it: on which head theſe perſons would do well to examine themſelves. But the far more ordinary fault is the oppoſite one: narrowing the bounds of our friendly diſpoſitions; and excluding thoſe from the benefit of being our neighbours, who have a right to it.

The principal cauſes of this are three: Hatred, pride and ſelfiſhneſs.

1. One chief ground of hatred long hath been, and is, diverſity of faith or worſhip: of which caſe we have a moſt remarkable inſtance, *Luke* x. 25, &c. There *a certain lawyer ſtanding up, and tempting* our Saviour with the queſtion, *What ſhall I do to inherit eternal life?* he draws from his own mouth the anſwer, *thou ſhalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbour as thyſelf:* then tells him, *thou haſt anſwered right: this do, and thou ſhalt live. But he, willing,* as the evangeliſt obſerves, *to juſtify himſelf, ſaid unto Jeſus, and who is my neighbour?* imagining, no doubt, as the ſequel ſhewed, and as moſt of his countrymen thought at that time, and many ages after*, if they do not ſtill, that none but the members of his own communion deſerved the name; and that all others were to be deemed unrelated to him, and held in abhorrence. This abominable notion our bleſſed Lord might have confuted by numerous paſſages of the Old Teſtament†: but he thought it more uſeful to humble the vain man, by convicting him from the teſtimony of his conſcience, and making him confeſs, without perceiving it, how unjuſt his interpretation was. For this end he tells him the moving ſtory, that you all know, of the *Jew* and the *Samaritan;* of which two nations the former deteſted the latter beyond all others: and having eaſily brought him to declare, that the Samaritan had acted the neighbourly part, as he ought, to the Jew; it evidently followed, that a *Jew*, upon occaſion, ſhould act the ſame part to a *Samaritan. Which thinkeſt thou was neighbour to him that fell amongſt the thieves? And he ſaid, he that ſhewed mercy on him. Then ſaid Jeſus unto him, go and do thou likewiſe.* O that all chriſtians of all denominations had learned, or would yet learn, from hence and from the whole tenour of the goſpel, what ſome of them in particular are lamentably ignorant of, or worſe: that kindneſs and tenderneſs, and much more juſtice and equity, are due to thoſe of every ſect and party,

* See Lightfoot's Harm. of New Teſt. and on this hiſtory.
† Exod. xxii. 21. xxiii. 9. Lev. xix. 33, 34. Deut. x. 19. &c.

rom whom they differ the moſt widely; and due, as a
n of their *inheriting eternal life!*

her thing, which often withholds our kind regard from
objects of it, and excites hatred to them, is rivalſhip
t, advancement, affection, reputation. And we may
the world, perhaps feel in ourſelves, if we examine, as
ry one ſhould, that competitions, not only about matters
e weight, but the mereſt trifles, can turn the beſt neigh-
, the neareſt relations, the deareſt friends, into abſolute
ers, if not bitter enemies. Nay, the bare ſucceſs of o-
where we neither were nor could be their competitors,
ough ſometimes to alienate our hearts from them to a
ge degree. Yet ſurely we ought not to be hated by o-
, either for aiming at, or obtaining advantages, by any
means: nor conſequently they by us. Nay, ſhould they,
ich a caſe, thwart an important intereſt of ours, to ſecure
nconſiderable one of their own: even this, though a ſad
ct of generoſity, may in ſtrictneſs of ſpeech be no injuſ-
.

But further, ſuppoſing a man hath directly done us a pal-
ble injury, ſtill he is our neighbour. Perhaps it was igno-
ntly, or inadvertently, or from ſuch frailty as we and all men
liable to: or it is but a ſlight or a ſingle offence: or we
d provoked him to it; or received favours from him, that
erbalance it: or he hath good qualities in other reſpects,
at intitle him to our eſteem. Or if he be, on the whole,
icked: yet poſſibly he is not incorrigible. While we are too
uch offended to bear with him, our heavenly Father, whom he
ith much more offended, bears with him; and is graciouſly
ying all methods to reclaim him. You will ſay, "God
nnot be hurt by his wickedneſs." Why, neither need you.
y patience, you may always turn it to your ſpiritual improve-
ent: by prudence, you may generally avoid any temporal
arm from it. You may, if it be neceſſary, puniſh him for it:
et conſider him as one whom you could heartily wiſh to treat
ore gently.

2. The ſame bad effect, that reſentment hath on ſome,
ride alone hath on others: they cannot allow ſuch low
reatures, as the multitude are, to claim their notice, and even
heir love, by a preſumptuous name, which implies a ſort of
equality with them. But indeed they are not only our neigh-
bours,

bours, but our brethren: for God *hath made of one blood all that dwell on the face of the earth**. They have the ſame principles of human nature, the ſame rights of human ſociety, the ſame protection of divine providence here, the ſame covenant of eternal glory hereafter. And if we cannot, for the ſake of theſe things, overlook the contemptibleneſs of their outward appearance, and treat them with compaſſion and beneficence, inſtead of ſcorn; we are much meaner wretches than great numbers of them.

3. A third inducement to deny others a claim to our neighbourly regard is ſelfiſhneſs: a worſe turn of mind, on ſome accounts, than either of the former. A man's anger and pride can affect but part of his neighbours, uſually a ſmall one: to the reſt he may ſtill be friendly and beneficent But the ſelfiſh man acknowledges no neighbour: is concerned ſolely for himſelf, and what he is pleaſed to reckon his own intereſt; which he places in wealth or rank, power or pleaſure. And they who ſeek wealth only by exceſſive frugality, are generally diſliked rather more than they deſerve. But ſuch as enrich or advance themſelves by the wickedeſt rapaciouſneſs and baſeneſs, provided they live ſplendidly and expenſively, are conſidered with an indulgence, that hath extremely pernicious fruits. And the moſt abandoned purſuers of immoral pleaſure obtain, by their ſhewiſh gaiety, the character of the beſt natured people imaginable: though they often have originally, and ſeldom fail to acquire, the moſt abſolute inſenſibility to public welfare, the ties of hoſpitality and friendſhip, the diſtreſſes of families, and even of the unhappy creatures who have believed their profeſſions of the tendereſt ſentiments.

But next in guilt to ſuch as mind none but themſelves, is he, that fixes upon one, or ſome few, relations or favourites, for the objects of his whole affection: a fault the more dangerous, as poſſibly it may appear to him a virtue. He is doing his ſhare of good: taking care of thoſe, who naturally, or by a ſort of adoption, belong to him. And doubtleſs we are peculiarly intruſted with ſuch: but not authorized either to injure or neglect others for the ſake of exalting theſe to a height that is needleſs, and perhaps hurtful even to themſelves. Kindneſs of heart was planted in men, not to divide the world into little parties, each of which ſhould keep ſeparate from and be zealous againſt the reſt; but to unite all, as much

* Acts xvii. 26.

much as could be, into one neighbourhood, indeed one body, animated with one ſoul. It is not for our family, or our friends alone, that God is concerned, or would have us concerned: but univerſal good is his end, and univerſal goodwill is the great inſtrument which he hath given us to promote it. Therefore we muſt always bear in mind the common relation of man to man: and, whenever it is doubtful whether that, or the particular ties of blood or intimacy require the preference, far from following the ſtrongeſt propenſity blindfold, we ſhould labour to preſerve the ſincereſt impartiality in forming our judgement: for that and that only will effectually plead our excuſe, if we err, as without queſtion we often do:

Having now ſeen the ſcriptural and rational extent of the phraſe, *thy neighbour*, let us conſider,

II. What, and how neceſſary, that love is, which the commandment in the text enjoins us to bear him. This, I hope, hath appeared already in ſome meaſure: but muſt be ſhewn more diſtinctly, becauſe too many object, that they cannot help hating ſome perſons, and ſee no cauſe to love many others.

Now, it ſhould be conſidered, we have two ſorts of love: one of eſteem, founded on the opinion that men are deſerving; the other, of mere benevolence, founded on the knowledge that they are capable of pleaſure and pain. The former we may juſtly be expected to have for all we can: the latter, for all abſolutely. There are people in the world, for whom we cannot well have much eſteem. Yet every one hath ſome valuable qualities. Thoſe whom we diſlike, it is great odds, have more than we allow them: poſſibly, were it not for our paſſions and prejudices, we ſhould find ſeveral of them to be highly worthy and amiable. And, though we are not always obliged to be acquainted with their merit, we are obliged not to detract from it. But, whatever ground we may have to think ill of them, nothing hinders us from wiſhing well to them. If they are bad, is there not great need of wiſhing they were better? Continuing ſuch as they are, is it not reaſonable to wiſh them every enjoyment, that will do no harm to them or others? Do they not often in this world, and will they not certainly in the next, pay dearly enough for their wickedneſs? And is it not the part of humanity then to exerciſe pity towards them; and leave vengeance to him whoſe it is?

"But

"But they are our enemies: is that a title to our love?" No, certainly. You are not commanded to love them becauſe they are your enemies, or the more for being ſo: but only, in a due meaſure, notwithſtanding they are your enemies. Perhaps indeed they are not ſo: at leaſt, to near the degree that you imagine. But if they were: hath not God loved us, and ſent his Son to die for us, *when we were enemies*[*]? Hath he not abundant right to expect this return from us? doth he not expreſsly tell us, he expects it: Hath he not planted a natural principle of relenting and forgiveneſs in us? And is he not ready to aſſiſt us continually, by his grace, in the revival and cultivation of it?

But you will ſay, "Even to our enemies we will do no wrong: ſhould a proper occaſion offer, we will do them ſervice: and then, how can it ſignify any thing, what our affections to them are!" Why, you may profeſs to behave thus, without loving them at all; and you may poſſibly deſign it: but you will not keep up to it. Such as your affections are, ſuch will your actions be: and endeavouring to reſtrain the latter, without amending the former, you will find, is continual uneaſineſs, and much labour, to little purpoſe. Rectifying your inward diſpoſition is going to the root of the matter. To think of your neighbour with mildneſs and candour, and therefore behave to him with equity and kindneſs, is a plain way. But when you pretend never to do him harm, though you always wiſh it him; and to be ready to promote his happineſs, while you deſire his miſery: either you are not in earneſt, or you do not know yourſelf; it is too hard for human ſtrength. So that in this, indeed, in every inſtance, where chriſtianity may ſeem to have made our duty more difficult, by enjoining the reformation of our hearts as well as our lives, it hath on the contrary made it practicable and eaſy, by putting us in the only true method. Beſides, regulating the one, without the other, if we could do it, would be utterly inſufficient to anſwer our Maker's great end, the purifying of our natures, and exalting us to a capacity of heavenly bliſs. The affections, in the moral ſenſe, are the man. And if you give up to God your outward actions only, your ſacrifice is defective and unacceptable. You will plead, it may be, that to him you give up your whole

[*] Rom. v. 10.

ſoul: for you love God intirely, though you hate bad
But loving them, is one main proof which he requires
r loving him. If you loved, you would obey, you
imitate him. And therefore St. *John* declares, *If a*
*ry, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar**.
erve alſo, that as your love to your brethren muſt be
d and ſincere, ſo it muſt have in view, not merely their
t gratification, but their laſting benefit, even in oppoſi-
o that; and not merely their welfare in this world, but
: next too. For never was there ſurely a more dreadful
of words, than to call that good-nature, which compla-
r allows acquaintance, dependants, friends, relations ever
ar, to go on unmoleſted to ruin, here and hereafter: nay,
ften, directly invites and leads them to it. The ſcripture,
ohibiting this behaviour, gives it the oppoſite name, and
juſtly. *Thou ſhalt not hate thy brother in thine heart:*
ſhalt rebuke thy neighbour, and not ſuffer ſin upon him†.
ence, take notice again, that mere deſire of good to another,
n more is in our power, will by no means be ſufficient.
e is an active principle: and if we ſtop ſhort, be it through
urioufneſs, or be it through indolence, contented with on-
vilhing well to thoſe, whom with moderate pains and ex-
ce we might actually ſerve; it is leaving that affection to
ad itſelf in doing nothing, unleſs it be cheating us with an
gination of our being better than we are, which God hath
mmanded us to cheriſh and exert for the nobleſt pur-
ſes.

But admitting, that we are to *love our neighbour* in this
anner, ſtill doth not the command of loving him *as ourſelves*,
tend to ſomething impoſſible? Certainly not. For we meet
ith ſeveral inſtances of perſons being ſaid to love others *as*
eir own ſouls, or themſelves, both in the ſacred‡ and pro-
ne writers§: and we are to underſtand the phraſe agreeably

* 1 John iv. 20. † Lev. xix. 17. ‡ Deut. xiii. 6. 1 Sam. xviii. 3. xx. 17.

§ In quibus enim eadem ſtudia ſunt, eædemque voluntates, in his fit, ut æque quiſque altero delectetur, ac ſe ipſo: efficiturque id, quod Pythagoras ultimum in amicitia putavit, ut unus fiat ex pluribus. Cic. Off. i. 17. Ex quo perſpicitur, cum hanc benevolentiam late longeque diffuſam vir ſapiens in aliquem pari virtute præditum contulerit, tum illud effici quod quibuſdam incredibile videatur, ſit autem neceſſarium, ut nihil ſeſe plus quam alterum diligat. Quid enim eſt quod differat,

to their meaning; not to ſtretch it farther than they can mean. In ſcripture, at leaſt, it doth not denote the very higheſt affection that we are capable of. For the duty of loving God is plainly deſigned to be expreſſed in ſtronger terms, than that of loving our neighbour. Yet the latter muſt imply, not only good-will as real as we bear to ourſelves; for, if it be inconſiderable, it will be ineffectual: but alſo a large degree of good-will; for that alſo we bear to ourſelves. And farther, we are to love him in proportion as we love ourſelves: to pay a more attentive regard to his intereſts, the more powerfully we are addicted by nature or cuſtom to regard our own; and ſo preſerve the balance of our affections in due poiſe. This, however, we ſhall do much better, if we alſo take the expreſſion, as we juſtly may, to comprehend an injunction, that we love and conſider our neighbour juſt as much as we ſhould love and conſider ourſelves, were we in his caſe. For, though we be equally affected by his circumſtances and our own, ſo far as we can know and feel both, this will carry us no unfit lengths in his favour: becauſe we cannot know and feel both in the ſame degree; and, though we could, no harm would follow. Indeed we are ſometimes bound, in the practical ſenſe, to love our neighbour more than ourſelves: to ſhew a greater concern for his good, not only than we do ſhew for our own; for which, God knows, in the principal points, we often ſhew none at all; but than we ought to ſhew for our own: becauſe a very important advantage of his may be in queſtion; and a ſmall one, in compariſon, of ours; which it would be meanneſs not to ſlight: or the advantage of many may be in one ſcale, and our own ſingly in the other. Now, when that happens, we may be obliged to go ſo far as to *lay down our lives for* our *brethren**; not only for their eternal, but temporal welfare. Still, unqueſtionably, in all caſes that but approach towards an equality, we act allowably in preferring ourſelves, where no obligation of juſtice or truth exacts the contrary. And, in the endleſs variety of circumſtances that occur in human life, all that could be done by precept, at leaſt by any one ſhort

cum ſint cuncta paria? Cic. de Leg. i. 12. where ſee more. But he requires this degree of love not to every man, but between perfectly wiſe and good men. The doctrine of the Epicureans was, nullo modo poſſe amicitiam tueri, niſi eoque amicos & nos ipſos diligamus. Cic. de Fin. i. 20. where ſee more.

* 1 John iii. 16.

precept, and ſuch mankind muſt have, was to give as ning a caution as poſſible againſt the greateſt danger, and r a direction as poſſible how to avoid it; which, I hope, e ſenſible, the precept before us hath done; and then re both right and wrong minds to ſhew what they are: e, by chearfully taking, and diligently ſeeking, if there ed, fit opportunities of doing acts of humanity; the by raiſing ſcruples, inventing evaſions, and neglecting ineſt calls, becauſe ſome are doubtful.

n may indeed be too prone to follow every good-natur- mpulſe. And the few who have cauſe to ſuſpect they ould conſider what they owe to themſelves, and to other nds upon them, preſent, or probably future, as well as to bject which now ſtrikes them: they ſhould aſk the ment of pious and prudent friends: they ſhould have regard to the judgement even of the leſs good part of world; elſe they may poſſibly diſcredit the duty which would wiſh to recommend. But giving ourſelves up influenced ſolely or chiefly by common opinion and ice, is the way to extinguiſh every thing that is right is. To a proper degree therefore the ſon of *Sirach's* e is neceſſary to be obſerved: *In every good work truſt own ſoul, for this is the keeping of the commandment*[*]. ight meaning, with a moderate ſhare of diſcretion, will ſafe guide through whatever perplexities may at any ariſe in relation to this precept.

till you will ſay, perhaps, that, explain and limit it as we , it is very hard after all, that, in order to obey God, demonſtrate our love to him, we muſt diſobey the dictates he ſtrongeſt and uſefulleſt principle he hath planted in our ure, the love of ourſelves, and adopt others, often of very leſerving characters in our own room. But conſider: ſelf- e is not happineſs; it is not always the inſtrument of pro- ing happineſs; but makes us uneaſy and wretched. It can ocure happineſs no otherwiſe than by exciting us to gratify r natural inclinations, when that will do us good; and re- aining us from gratifying them, when it would do us arm. Now love to our fellow-creatures is one of our na- ral inclinations. We all feel and ſhew it to be ſo, in ſome

[*] Eccluſ. xxxii. 23.

inſtances, more or leſs. And why is not the indulgence of it, within the bounds now preſcribed, as likely to do us much good and little harm, as that of any other? It is a pleaſing movement of mind in itſelf. Reflection upon it affords a ſecond pleaſure. We approve and eſteem ourſelves for having it, and for attempting what it prompts us to. If we ſucceed, we have exquiſite joy: if we fail, it is no inconſiderable comfort, that we meant well. And, ordinarily ſpeaking, all around us commend and applaud us for it. By theſe means our goodneſs often brings us great worldly advantages: and very often is attended with no worldly diſadvantage. For there are many and daily ways of exerciſing it without expence or trouble. And if the reſt do coſt us ſomething, perhaps we can well bear it, and not be at all the worſe. But, were it more, do our indulgences of other inclinations coſt us nothing? Do not the debaucheries, the reſentments, the amuſements, the vanities, the caprices of men, interfere much more frequently and irreconcileably with the trueſt and neareſt even of their temporal intereſts, than the love of their neighbour doth? "But theſe things, you will ſay, give much higher delight." Perhaps not. For multitudes purſue with ſtrange eagerneſs what yields them very little ſatisfaction. At beſt, it is a very unwiſe delight. And poſſibly you are pleaſed with your preſent objects of deſire, only becauſe you have ſet yourſelves to be pleaſed with them. Set yourſelves therefore to be pleaſed with promoting the welfare of others: and you will find your account in it, beyond any thing in this world.

Indeed almoſt all the miſery of this world proceeds from the want of it. The unavoidable evils of life are nothing to thoſe which we bring upon one another voluntarily, by ill-nature, inſenſibility and heedleſs diſregard. Theſe are the heavy ſufferings, that every one complains of and groans under, and always muſt, if every one will be guilty of ſuch behaviour: and nothing can put an end to it, but ſocial love. Inſtead therefore of being againſt the intereſt of any man, it is moſt eſſentially for the intereſt of all men: and were it to prevail univerſally upon earth, no injury would be attempted, no act of kindneſs neglected. For this, as St. *Paul* argues, *thou ſhalt not commit adultery, thou ſhalt not kill, thou ſhalt not ſteal, thou ſhalt not bear falſe witneſs, thou ſhalt not covet; and if there*

be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in ſaying, thou ſhalt love thy neighbour as thyſelf. Love th no ill to his neighbour; allows no commiſſion, no on, that may be hurtful to him: *therefore love is the ful- of the law**: all the obligations of human ſociety are ied up in it. With perfect juſtice then doth our bleſſed declare, that *on theſe two commandments*, right affection to and to man, both which imply it towards ourſelves, *hang e law and the prophets*†.

t ſtill, it may be, you will plead, "how happy ſoever : world would become, were all men influenced by theſe inciples; yet, ſince they are not, why muſt we?" Be- the whole can be amended only by the ſeparate amend- of each part. "But, you will ſay, unleſs the reſt will iend, of which, to ſpeak moderately, there is no likelihood our time, the wickedneſs and miſery of mankind muſt, we are to love them ſo well, and ſeek their good ſo ear- ſtly, occaſion us much fruitleſs pain, innumerable diſ- pointments and melancholy reflections." Why, ſo it will, : engage in too great, or too difficult, or too many under- igs; if we raiſe our expectations too high; or ſuffer op- ion, either to kindle us into vehemence, or plunge us into ir. But we may go on very comfortably, if we preſerve rue temper: exerting a calm ſettled benevolence on all fit ions, becauſe we ought; without hoping to ſucceed very , or to produce on the whole any remarkable change for etter: but labouring the more conſtantly for this very n, that not a little of what we do will, to all appearance, reſpect to others, be labour loſt. *In the moruing ſow ſeed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou oeſt not, whether ſhall proſper, this or that; or whether both ſhall be alike good*‡. But thus much we know how- , that the ſeemingly moſt unprofitable exerciſes of kindneſs not only be of unſpeakable benefit to ourſelves in the ıot, which might ſurely ſuffice us, but will prove ſome ns in the hands of divine wiſdom for bringing forth at th general good out of all evil. Being therefore thus *labour- together with God*§, why ſhould not we be happy in our proportion;

* Rom. xiii. 9, 10. † Matth. xxii. 40.
‡ Eccl. xi. 6. § 1 Cor. iii. 9.

proportion; as he is perfectly, notwithſtanding the failure of his gracious purpoſes towards a world, which he loves infinitely better, than the beſt of us can?

But you will argue further yet: "Whatever peace we may "have within, we ſhall have none without, but be laughed at "for poor tame wretches, and trampled on ſecurely." No ſuch thing. Though few may imitate you, very few will in earneſt deſpiſe you, and fewer ſtill attack you in any material point. Love to all men cannot often provoke any man. And in caſe of aſſault, you are not forbidden the juſt methods of ſelf-preſervation; you are commanded to be prudent, as well as *harmleſs**: you have the laws to protect you: all the good to ſupport you, from inclination; and moſt of the bad, if for no better a reaſon, yet leaſt they ſhould ſuffer next. You will ſcruple, I own, taking ſome advantages, by which they often ſucceed: but you will alſo avoid ſome diſadvantages, by which they are often ruined. And, beſides human helps, you will have the providence of God on your ſide, both to defend you, and perhaps to reward you openly even here. Or, ſhould he ſee it beſt for you to go without temporal recompences, nay to ſuffer temporal inconveniences ever ſo grievous: bear but all patiently from a ſenſe of duty to him, and you will be filled with conſolation in this world, and aſſured of glory in that which is to come.

Truſt him therefore boldly with the abſolute direction of your hearts and lives. Let thoſe, who reſolve to be too cunning for their Maker, ſuppreſs and extinguiſh every friendly ſentiment in their breaſts, be blind and deaf to the diſtreſſes of all around them, purſue with unremitting fervour their own intereſts, their own pleaſures, their own ſchemes of malevolence, *hateful and hating one another*†. But let us *be ſimple concerning evil, and wiſe* only *unto that which is good*‡: *ſhew mercy with cheerfulneſs, love without diſſimulation, be kindly affectioned, in honour preferring one another, diſtributing to the neceſſities of the ſaints: rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep; be not high-minded, but condeſcend to men of low eſtate*§: look with pleaſure on the virtues, the accompliſhments, the ſucceſs of others: be ſlow to believe their faults,

* Matth. x. 16. † Tit. iii. 3.
‡ Rom. xvi. 19. § Rom. xii. 8,—16.

faults, think of them with concern, and treat them with mildneſs: *love* even *our enemies, bleſs them that curſe us, do good to them that hate us, and pray for them that deſpitefully uſe us, and perſecute us. For ſo ſhall we be the children of our Father, which is in heaven; who maketh his ſun to riſe on the evil and the good, and ſendeth rain on the juſt and on the unjuſt*[a].

[a] Matth. v. 44, 45.

SER-

SERMON LVII.

Our Saviour's Temptation in the Wilderness.

MATTH. iv. 1.

Then was Jeſus led up of the Spirit into the wilderneſs, to be tempted of the devil.

AS the word of God acquaints us with many things of great importance, concerning our preſent and future condition, which we could not elſe have known: ſo it opens to us particularly, a very intereſting ſcene, in the diſcoveries which it makes of our connexions with the inhabitants of the inviſible world, both good and bad. Indeed, that various orders of rational beings beſides man, and ſuperior to him, exiſt in this univerſe, is of itſelf extremely probable. That ſome, even of the higheſt of them, ſhould become wicked, is only a wonder of the ſame kind, as that too many of the beſt abilities amongſt men ſhould make the worſt uſe of them. That for their wickedneſs they ſhould be *caſt down** from *their firſt eſtate*†, and confined to a very different one, is a natural conſequence of the divine juſtice and rectitude. That, though ſufferers already for their crimes, they ſhould yet be *reſerved unto the* ſeverer *judgement of the great day*, is but juſt the very thing that reaſon teaches concerning the ſinners of the human race alſo. That they ſhould be deſirous in the mean time of ſeducing us into tranſgreſſion, is very natural: for we ſee the profligate amongſt ourſelves deſirous every day of doing the like. That this would be poſſible for them, is by no means inconceivable: for, ſince the material frame of our earth is confeſſedly liable to powerful influences from other

* 2 Pet. ii. 4. † Jude 6.

other parts of the creation, why may not the intelligent natures in it be ſo too? That evil ſpirits ſhould be permitted to aſſault us in a degree conſiſtent with our freedom of will, is evidently as reconcilable both to the holineſs and goodneſs of God, as that we are ſuffered to tempt one another, often perhaps full as dangerouſly. That they ſhould be capable of conveying their ſuggeſtions to us, and we not know their manner of doing it, can hardly be called ſtrange: for we ſcarce know the manner how any one thing in the world is done, if we examine it to the bottom; not even how we convey our own thoughts to thoſe with whom we converſe. And that we ſhould be expoſed to theſe temptations, without perceiving them to proceed from any ſuch cauſe, is far from incredible: for we are frequently influenced, and ſtrongly too, by perſons of no higher powers and abilities than ourſelves, without perceiving that they influence us at all.

But, though every one of theſe things is rationally ſuppoſeable, yet ſcripture only can ſatisfy us, that they are true in fact: and ſo accordingly it fully doth. For though it tells us, that bad angels are held *in everlaſting chains under darkneſs**, it tells us likewiſe, that *our adverſary the devil as a roaring lion walketh about*, meaning doubtleſs, within the extent of his chain, *ſeeking whom he may devour*†. And yet, even after the teſtimony of ſcripture given to theſe doctrines; as they relate to matters which lie out of ſight, and therefore affect the mind but faintly, unleſs the truth and importance of them be carefully impreſſed upon it, we receive them too commonly with only a wavering kind of half belief, which produces no manner of ſerious thought about them. And ſo by degrees we firſt overlook, and then doubt, and then reject, one part after another, of what is revealed concerning the hidden regions of the creation; (as, indeed, if once we begin, where ſhall we ſtop?) till, at length, inſtead of *walking*, as chriſtians ought, *by* that *faith*‡, which *is the evidence of things not ſeen*§, we come to conſider earthly objects as the only realities, and heaven and hell, and the inhabitants of each, as nothing at all.

Some, it muſt be owned, far from diſbelieving what they underſtand their bible to teach on theſe ſubjects, make it almoſt a point of religion to believe a great deal more: where-

* Jude 6. † 1 Pet. v. 8. ‡ 2 Cor. v. 7. § Heb. xi. 1.

as the plain and ſafe rule certainly is, to go as far ſcripture goes, but alſo to ſtop where ſcripture ſtops. For whatever notions are credulouſly entertained, beyond its warrant, will always, in the event, weaken, inſtead of confirming, the perſuaſion of its genuine articles. But undeniably, the prevailing extreme at preſent is, that of queſtioning, or ſlighting, though we do not queſtion, whatever is placed a little without the reach of our own faculties, be it ever ſo clearly aſſerted by our Maker himſelf. This turn of mind is highly undutiful; and tends to miſlead us, in the whole of religion firſt, and then of common life. The remedies for it are, to think of ourſelves with humility, and read and conſider the doctrines of God's word with reverent attention. That of our being tempted by inviſible powers needs not have any wrong effects upon us, and may have very right ones. For, as theſe temptations are not diſtinguiſhable by us from thoſe which ariſe of themſelves in our own breaſts, and may be reſiſted effectually by the ſame methods, the belief of them can by no juſt conſequence drive us either into ſuperſtition or deſpondency. But the conſideration of having ſuch an additional adverſary, beſides the world and the fleſh, muſt naturally increaſe our watchfulneſs, and thankful dependence on the help of divine grace: and the reflexion that, in committing ſin, we are complying with the ſuggeſtions, and gratifying the malice, of the enemies of God, of our own ſouls, and of the whole creation, cannot but incline us to a ſtrong abhorrence even of ſuch tranſgreſſions, as we might elſe have been diſpoſed to view in a pleaſing light.

Now, of all the paſſages of ſcripture which relate to this point of doctrine, there are none more inſtructive, than thoſe of the evangeliſts, in which we find our bleſſed Lord himſelf aſſaulted by the tempter: whoſe victory, for that reaſon, the wiſdom of the church hath taken care to ſet before our eyes in the goſpel for this day, as the propereſt admonition to us in the beginning of the preſent ſeaſon: the buſineſs of which, if we purpoſe to be at all the better for it, is arming ourſelves againſt thoſe temptations with which we may meet hereafter, as well as humbling ourſelves for having yielded to ſo many already. And therefore I ſhall now endeavour,

I.

I. To explain this part of our Saviour's hiſtory.

II. To point out, in a few words, the practical uſes that flow from it.

I. To explain this part of his hiſtory.

The number of wicked ſpirits is repreſented in ſcripture as very large. And yet one only, denoted by the name of *Satan*, or the devil, is generally mentioned as inticing men to ſin. The reaſon of this, in other places of holy writ, may be, that, as they are all united under one head, and engaged in one deſign, they are to be regarded by us as one adverſary: for, in the common language of war, we ſpeak of the enemy in the ſingular number, when yet we mean a multitude. But there is more eſpecial ground for it, in the text, as unqueſtionably *the prince of the demons** himſelf would perſonally engage in ſo arduous a combat, as that with *Jeſus* muſt appear likely to prove. That he, who bears ill-will to all men, ſhould earneſtly wiſh to miſlead and pervert one, whom he could not but ſee to be a very extraordinary man, and ſent on ſome errand of ſingular benefit to the human race, was to be expected. And that he ſhould hope to do it, may be accounted for, partly from hence: that as wicked men, though of eminent abilities, are perpetually attempting very abſurd things, ſo may wicked ſpirits too: as indeed all wickedneſs implies, in its very nature, the abſurdeſt hope and attempt in the world; that of being gainers by diſobeying a wiſe and juſt ruler, of infinite power. Beſides, the devil had fallen himſelf, even without a tempter: he had ſucceeded by the means of temptation againſt the firſt man, and more or leſs againſt all men ſince; and probably he knew not diſtinctly what manner of perſon this was whom he aſſaulted. For though he might know him to have been declared the Son of God, ſtill that name is capable of various meanings. Or, if he knew him to be the promiſed Meſſiah, yet he might imagine that this promiſe, as well as others, was a conditional one, though no condition was expreſſed; and therefore liable to be defeated. Or, at leaſt, rage might urge him to moleſt, though he deſpaired to overcome.

But then, why *the Lord of all*†, who quickly afterwards caſt out demons with a word, ſubmitted previouſly to ſuch repeated

 indignities,

* Matth. ix. 34. The word here is not Διαβολος, nor is that ever uſed of wicked ſpirits in the plural number: and therefore it is properer to ſay demons, than devils. † Acts x. 36.

indignities, as theſe trials made of him by the power of darkneſs, perhaps we cannot fully ſay. But this at leaſt may be ſaid very ſafely, that, for any thing we know, it might *behove him*, not only, in general, *to be made in all things like unto his brethren*, that ſo he might reſiſt the devil on our behalf perfectly, whom we reſiſt very imperfectly; but, in particular, to give the enemy all advantages and opportunities, in order to make his defeat more conſpicuous: beſides that we may gather, as I ſhall ſhew you in the concluſion, much inſtruction and much comfort from the benefit of his example, and from the condeſcending aſſurance, which *his having ſuffered himſelf, being tempted*, affords, that he will *ſuccour* us when we *are tempted* alſo*. The wicked one made this attack upon him at the beginning of his public appearance, becauſe undoubtedly he thought no time was to be loſt for preventing the good intended by it. And *Jeſus was led up of the Spirit* purpoſely to meet him, becauſe the divine omniſcience foreſaw the event. As for the choice of the wilderneſs for the ſcene of action; we find, that he often retired into places of ſolitude for meditation and prayer: and no wonder if he did it now, before he undertook the inexpreſſibly weighty office, for which a voice from heaven had juſt marked him out. The addition of faſting to his devotions was another inſtance (his baptiſm had already been one) of *fulfilling all righteouſneſs*†, by doing, in obedience to God's general appointment, what, if he did not want, good men in all ages have experienced, when uſed on fit occaſions, and to proper degree, very needful and beneficial. His faſting the determinate number of forty days, leads us immediately to recollect, that *Moſes* the giver of the law, and *Elias* the chief of the prophets, did the very ſame thing in their times, which he, who *came to fulfil the law and the prophets*‡, did now. Nor are there wanting remarkable coincidences of the number of forty on other occaſions. What ſecret of providence may lie concealed under them, appears not yet: future occurrences, perhaps, will ſhew it. But, in the mean while, we may venture to ſay this: that as our Saviour uſed ſo long and total an abſtinence but once, and we are incapable of uſing it ſo much as once; repeating a faint ſhadow of it every year cannot be our duty merely from his example: and

* Heb. ii. 17, 18. † Matth. iii. 15. ‡ Matth. v. 17.

and that neither himſelf nor his apoſtles having laid any ſuch command upon chriſtians, the faſt of *Lent* ſtands only on the footing of human, though ancient, injunction, and private prudence.

During theſe forty days, it is obſerved by St. *Mark*, our bleſſed Redeemer *was with the wild beaſts*; which words muſt imply, elſe they are of no ſignificance, that the fierceſt animals were awed by his preſence, and ſo far laid aſide their ſavage nature for the time: thus verifying literally what *Eliphaz* in *Job* ſaith figuratively concerning a good man. *At deſtruction and famine ſhalt thou laugh, neither ſhalt thou be afraid of the beaſts of the earth; for they ſhall be at peace with thee**. Nor doth St. *Mark* only, but St. *Luke* alſo acquaint us, that throughout theſe whole *forty days he was tempted of Satan*†; though in what particular manner, they have not ſaid; nor perhaps did he inform his very apoſtles: there being many things in his life, that were myſterious even to them; and no marvel then, if they are ſo to us.

When the days of his miraculous faſting were completed, the tempter came to him in a viſible form; a thing, which we have neither any reaſon from hence to fear will ever be our own caſe, or to believe is ever the caſe of other common men; nor yet to doubt of its having been his, from its never being ours or theirs. For the whole life of *Chriſt* was ſo full of wonders, that the hiſtory of his temptation is perfectly agreeable to the reſt: and we muſt either queſtion all, or no part. In what likeneſs the devil appeared, we are not told: probably reſembling one of the good angels, who ſeem by St. *Mark* to have attended our Saviour, and *miniſtered unto him*‡, in the courſe of this wonderful diſpenſation, before his combat, as well as after his conqueſt. We learn from St. *Paul*, that *Satan* hath been ſometimes *transformed into an angel of light*§. And ſuch a transformation, on the occaſion before us, not only ſuits beſt with his two laſt temptations, but was certainly the likelieſt to procure him ſucceſs in any of them. At leaſt he certainly did not appear what he was: for that would intirely have fruſtrated his intent. And accordingly we find, that as ſoon as he knew himſelf to be diſcovered, he deſpaired and fled.

The

* Job. v. 22, 23. † Mark i. 12. Luke iv. 2.
‡ Mark i. 13. § 2 Cor. xi. 14.

The firſt attack which the tempter made, was grounded on the bodily neceſſities of our bleſſed Lord; now again permitted to feel the appetite of hunger; and deſtitute, where he was, of all means to ſatisfy it. On this foundation the devil raiſed a propoſal of refined artifice: that he ſhould inſtantly make an experiment, and give a proof, of the truth and extent of the late declaration from heaven in his favour, *this is my beloved Son**, by ordering a ſupernatural ſupply for the want which preſſed him. *If thou be the Son of God, command that theſe ſtones be made bread*†. Every one, perhaps, may not immediately ſee where the fault of this would have been; which is the very circumſtance that made it a fit temptation. *Satan* had no proſpect of being able to lead him at one ſtep into a groſs tranſgreſſion: and any real deviation, however ſmall, from either piety or virtue, would have anſwered his end. Now, compliance with this counſel would have been a deviation. The voice from heaven alone carried evidence enough along with it of God's eſpecial regard to him: and deſiring a yet fuller demonſtration of it would certainly have argued a blame-worthy diffidence. He had been ſupported by the ſole word and will of his heavenly Father for forty days: why muſt he now, without any ſufficient notice of the change of that will, attempt a new miracle for providing himſelf bread to live on; as if the old one, which enabled him to live without it, had loſt its force? When God deſigned him to return to the ordinary way of life, he would furniſh him with every thing requiſite for it: but in the interval, it had been as abſurd for him to think of producing bread for himſelf in the wilderneſs, as for *Moſes* to have thought of producing it for the *Iſraelites* there, inſtead of the manna, rained down from heaven for their ſuſtenance. And therefore he anſwered, with the utmoſt propriety, in his own caſe, exactly what *Moſes* had obſerved to them upon theirs, *that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord*‡.

The wily ſerpent, appearing in all likelihood perfectly ſatisfied with this anſwer, and convinced that acting otherwiſe, than our Saviour did, would really have been diſtruſting God, propoſes next, (and poſſibly under colour of making amends) to give him the moſt illuſtrious opportunity of ſhewing the high-

eſt

* Matth. iii. 17. † Chap. iv. 3. ‡ Deut. viii. 3. Matth. iv. 4.

eſt confidence in God that could be. And, the meek *Jeſus* patiently yielding to what he clearly diſcerned the intention of, the tempter conveys him through the air, (no wonder that he ſuffered it, for he ſuffered wicked men to take much greater liberties with him afterwards) and places him on one of the battlements of the temple of *Jeruſalem*; exhorting him to caſt himſelf down in the ſight of all the worſhippers there aſſembled, and procure that glory to the deity, and that honour to himſelf, which muſt be the conſequence of their ſeeing publicly and literally fulfilled in him that prediction of the pſalmiſt concerning a pious man, which ſo eminently pious a one as he had certainly both reaſon and faith enough to depend on: *He ſhall give his angels charge concerning thee; and in their hands they ſhall bear thee up, leſt at any time thou daſh thy foot againſt a ſtone**: poſſibly inſinuating farther, by the uſe of theſe words, his own ambition of being employed as the inſtrument of ſo noble a miracle, for which he had juſt before ſhewn himſelf qualified, and the tutelary ſpirit of ſo excellent a perſon. But the Redeemer of mankind, far from being diſconcerted by the ſudden change of the argument, or dazzled by ſo ſpecious a plea, calmly anſwers by another text of ſcripture, explaining and limiting that, which the ſeducer had quoted imperfectly, and applied wrong: *Thou ſhalt not tempt the Lord thy God*†. As we ought not from diffidence to aſk new proofs of his power, where we have had ſufficient ones already, ſo neither muſt we from preſumption urge him to do for us what we have no need of, and what therefore he hath given us no right to expect. For they, who throw away the natural means, which he hath beſtowed on them for preſerving themſelves, forfeit all title to a ſupernatural protection.

Though unſucceſsful in both theſe aſſaults, the tempter, notwithſtanding, begins another without delay, probably built on the defeats which he had undergone. He places our bleſſed Lord, ſtill giving way to his vain efforts, on a commanding eminence; repreſents to him from thence, in extended view, or mimic imagery, or pompous deſcription‡, whatever was great and

* Pſ. xci. 11, 12. Matth. iv. 6. † Deut. vi. 16. Matth iv. 7.

‡ Heuman, Diſſ. Sylloge, tom i. p. i. Diſſ. 7. thinks he only pointed towards each kingdom, and ſhews that δεικνυω and *oſtendo* ſignify this. Bibl. Germ. 1748, Jan. p. 108. Spartian, in the life of Severus, ſaith, that from the top of a high mountain he ſaw Rome, *& orbem terrarum*. Cyprian, ad Donatum de Gratia Dei, p. 4. Ed. Fell, exhorts him: "Ad-

and ſplendid in the kingdoms of the earth; alledges, that to himſelf, as the vicegerent of the Almighty, the dominion of this ſublunary world was granted; over which he was willing to place, on the reaſonable terms of homage done to him for it, one, of whoſe ſuperior underſtanding and rightneſs of mind he had now made ſo thorough a trial. *All this power will I give thee; for it is delivered unto me. If therefore thou wilt worſhip me, all ſhall be thine**. To each of the former ſuggeſtions the holy *Jeſus* had replied without emotion: but now, when the majeſty of his heavenly Father was injured, and the faith of his own allegiance to him aſſailed, by ſo vile a falſehood, he bears no longer; tells the hypocrite, he knew him well for the adverſary of God, who had granted to no created being, much leſs to him, the honours, or the authority, which he claimed; and commands him that moment to quit his preſence. *Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, thou ſhalt worſhip the Lord thy God, and him only ſhalt thou ſerve. Then the devil leaveth him, and angels came and miniſtered unto him*†, doubtleſs whatever his condition required.

All hopes of ſeducing him were now at an end. What remained, was only to oppoſe and perſecute him. And, as this method was taken very ſoon after the former failed, St. *Luke* obſerves, that *the devil departed from him* but *for a ſeaſon*‡. Accordingly *Chriſt* himſelf expreſſes the whole of his public life on earth by the phraſe of *his temptations*§. But as every contrivance of *the ruler of darkneſs*‖ againſt him proved ineffectual; ſo that, which he laboured moſt, and at length accompliſhed, the taking away of his life, inſtead of preventing the erection of our Saviour's rightful kingdom, gave the mortal blow to his own uſurped tyranny. For *through death* the Son of man *deſtroyed him who had the power of death, that is the devil: and having ſpoiled principalities and powers, triumphed over them on his croſs*¶.

II. I come now to ſpeak briefly of the practical uſes that flow from this part of our Saviour's hiſtory. And the following

te crede ſubduci in montis ardui verticem celſiorem, ſpeculare inde rerum infra te jacentium facies; & oculis in diverſa porrectis, ipſe a terrenis contactibus liber, fluctuantis mundi turbines intuere. And hence he ſuppoſes him to ſee the whole of it.

* Luke iv. 6, 7. † Matth. iv. 10, 11. ‡ Luke iv. 13.
§ Luke xxiii. 28. ‖ Eph. vi. 12. ¶ Col. ii. 14, 15.

ing are not inconſiderable: that the beſt of men are no more exempt from temptations, than others; but may poſſibly be tried with a larger ſhare of them, and ſuch as are harder to be withſtood: that every one therefore ought, in every part of life, to prepare for them; and no one, merely on account of his ſuffering ever ſo many, to doubt of the favour and love of God: that allurements to evil may perhaps beſet us with peculiar importunity in the entrance upon our chriſtian courſe; but, if we reſiſt them faithfully then, may ceaſe in a great meaſure afterwards; and God's grace enable us to go ſafely nd honourably through the ſevereſt conflicts of any other kind: hat retirement and meditation, faſting and prayer, are the ght preparatives againſt all ſolicitations to ſin; which yet ay come upon us in the very midſt of our religious duties, d ſtricteſt obſervances; nay, *Satan* may ſeek advantage from em to miſlead us: that if, even at ſuch times we are not ſere, much leſs are we ſo in the midſt of the cares and purſts, but eſpecially the pleaſures of life; by thoughtleſs ingence of which, we invite and aid the tempter, whom we ght to ſhun and oppoſe: that we ſhould never venture out he plain road of duty, to ſupply the moſt urgent neceſſities: er run into needleſs danger, in hope of extraordinary deance; never accept the greateſt advantages, when offered ie price of our innocence; that riches, and honours, and er are the moſt dangerous of trials, being reſerved for the in the caſe of our bleſſed Lord: and whoever can reject inſtantly with indignation, when offered on ſinful condias he did, is far advanced in the road to perfection: that g up the doctrines and precepts of ſcripture in our hearts, for uſe, is providing the beſt defence againſt our ſpiritumies; yet that ſcripture itſelf may be eaſily perverted to lde us, unleſs we carefully interpret one part of it by a-, and every one by the deſign of the whole: that the al way of dealing with all evil ſuggeſtions, is to repel vith an immediate, and ſhort, and determinate anſwer, d on God's word; and that permitting them to reply nd plead with us, is only giving them a handle to dend deſtroy us: that they, who are led by the provif God to meet difficulties, will, if they aſk it, be filled e Spirit of God to go through them; and ſo *with the*

*temptation he will alſo make a way to eſcape** : or, to ſpeak in St. *James*'s words, that *if we reſiſt the devil, he will flee from us : and if we draw nigh to God, he will draw nigh to us*†. That ſince *we have not an high prieſt which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but* one, *who was in all points tempted like as we are, we may come boldly* through him *to the throne of grace, and find help in time of need.* But then, as he was *tempted without ſin*‡, we muſt imitate, though we cannot equal him; and really, though not perfectly in this life, conquer ſin alſo: for only *to him that overcometh will he grant to ſit with him in his throne*§. Yet, as the tempter *departed* from our Lord himſelf only *for a ſeaſon*, we are not to imagine, that he will ever depart wholly from us: but may ſtill comfort ourſelves, that if we *put on the armour of God, and wreſtle againſt him* as we ought, *we ſhall be able to ſtand againſt* all *his wiles*‖: nay, every attempt to weaken our virtues, ſhall only prove a wholeſome exerciſe to ſtrengthen and improve them; till at length, having *fought the good fight of faith*, we ſhall *lay hold on eternal life*¶; and not only the angels, who miniſter to us now aſſiſtance in our conflict, ſhall join with our fellow ſaints in applauding our victory, but *the captain of our ſalvation*§§ himſelf acknowledge us openly for *his good and faithful ſoldiers and ſervants*††. *Bleſſed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he ſhall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promiſed to them who love him*‡‡.

* 1 Cor. x. 13. † James iv. 7, 8. ‡ Heb. iv. 15, 16.
§ Rev iii. 21. ‖ Eph. vi. 11, 12. ¶ 1 Tim. vi. 12.
§§ Heb. ii. 10. †† Matth. xxv. 21. 2 Tim. ii. 3. ‡‡ James i. 12.

SER-

SERMON LVIII.

The Misery and Unhappiness of a Sensual and Worldly Spirit.

Phil. ii. 21.

For all ſeek their own; not the things which are Jeſus Chriſt's.

THESE words contain both an account what the practice of mankind is, and alſo an intimation what it ſhould be. And therefore, in diſcourſing upon them, it will be proper,

I. To conſider what is meant by *ſeeking our own things.*

II. What by *ſeeking the things of Jeſus Chriſt.*

III. To explain and prove the aſſertion, that *all ſeek* the former, *not* the latter.

IV. To ſhew what we are to learn from it.

I. *Seeking our own things*, is purſuing our own inclinations and fancies, or imagined worldly intereſt. And many ſtrange fancies people of all ranks indulge. Some never aſk themſelves, whether the courſe which they are taking is likely to be for their good: others never ſlacken it, though from time to time they ſtrongly ſuſpect it is not. Often they adopt, without examination, the opinions of thoſe about them, whom yet they are far from eſteeming: and either will not ſee, that better judges think differently; or do ſee it, and will not regard it, but follow cuſtom blindfold, even againſt their own liking. Or it may be, they think a little, but think ſhort; neither to the end; nor to any conſiderable part, even of the preſent life; imagine what pleaſes now, muſt always pleaſe; and what brings no inconvenience yet, will never bring any. Indeed, uſually it is their principle point, to acquire the things which others wiſh for, though viſibly of no real uſe; and they are vehement for whatever will make them envied as happy perſons, though it produce little elſe than vexation and guilt. Some will not truſt even their own experience againſt their prepoſſeſſions; but force themſelves to believe, that the lives which they lead muſt needs be delightful, though they feel the contrary

contrary. Many loſe the opportunities, and even the reliſh, of moderate and rational pleaſures, by a wild purſuit of viſionary and extravagant ones. Nay, there are ſome, who not only follow wrong ways, but, as the text hath it, *ſeek* them: go purpoſely out of the plain road, as it were, in ſearch of miſery. It were much to be wiſhed, that all theſe were more ſtudious of their intereſt, even their temporal intereſt, than they are: it might be one ſtep towards becoming what they ought. But ſtill the moſt faithful and aſſiduous worſhippers of the world's great idols, applauſe, advancement, profit, power, entirely miſtake, if they hope that any of theſe things will either ſecure them laſting enjoyment, or preſerve them from acute miſery. A little reflection diſcovers, that happineſs conſiſts in ſomewhat ſtable and inward: whence the more thoughtful have learned to ſeek it in themſelves. But, alas! when we inſpect ourſelves, what a mixture do we find, of ignorance which we cannot enlighten, of weakneſs which we cannot ſtrengthen, of wrongneſs which we cannot ſet right! Beſides that all creatures, as ſuch, are eſſentially inſufficient for their own happineſs; there is by nature a void within us, which muſt be filled from above, or we muſt remain for ever craving and unſatisfied. Let us therefore look upwards, and conſider,

II. *The things which are Jeſus Chriſt's*: the benefits that he hath procured for us, with the knowledge of them that he hath communicated to us. And indeed what have we of value, that is not his? Some have pretended they could inveſtigate all the doctrines, the duties, the rewards of religion completely by their own reaſon, and form themſelves to a ſuitable diſpoſition by their own ſtrength. But the hiſtory of heatheniſm clearly ſhews, that no one ever did this; nor probably therefore ever would. The one true God was ſcarce known. Falſe deities of the worſt characters were adored, inſtead of him, with rites that ſeldom, if ever, mended their votaries, often corrupted them. The common rules of ſocial life were by no means throughly underſtood; as the ſhocking cuſtom of expoſing children to periſh, the barbarous combats of gladiators, the promiſcuous and unnatural practices of lewdneſs, publicly allowed, give dreadful proofs. But the internal virtues of the heart were ſtill leſs regarded; and they who ſeemed poſſeſſed of them, aſcribed the merit wholly to themſelves: very few ſaid ſo much as the Phariſee, *God, I thank thee, that I am not*

as other men are; ſcarce any with the publican, *God be merciful to me, a ſinner* §. Yet how continually are the beſt of men guilty of faults! But they had hardly any notion of the univerſal need of repentance, or any name for humility of ſoul. Forgiveneſs of injuries was very unſteadily taught: benevolence to enemies lay yet farther out of ſight. Courage injuriouſly exerciſed, patriotiſm ſhewn by invading the rights of their neighbours, and numbers of other ſplendid ſins, paſſed for heroic excellencies. There was very little hope of future bliſs to give men ſpirit in doing what was right, and leſs fear of future judgment to deter them from what was wrong. Such were the beſt inſtructed nations: and ſuch, or worſe, had we been probably now, but for the compaſſion of Jeſus Chriſt. Indeed without him we ſhould never have known, till too late, how bad our condition was. The real ſtate of mankind, with reſpect to God, was, in a great meaſure, unknown to them, before he underwent what he did, at once to lay open to us our danger, and to free us from it on moſt equitable terms. Even the myſterious parts of what he taught for this purpoſe lead us to reverence the divine wiſdom, and think modeſtly of our own; while the more diſtinctly intelligible direct us to every thing that is right and fit.

The goſpel hath laid the foundation of our duty in that ſtrong and thankful veneration of God, which his creating power, his providential care, his redeeming mercy, excite: which tends to inſpire us, with a deep concern for what we have done offenſive to him, an earneſt deſire of obeying his commands, an humble ſenſe that we need his aſſiſtance, a perſuaſion that he will grant it to us, a cheerful reliance on him for every thing that we want, in regard to this world and the next. This excellent frame of mind muſt powerfully reform the irregular appetites of ſenſe, immoderate deſires of pleaſure, vain fondneſs for pomp and pre-eminence, anxious cares about worldly events. And on ſuch love of God chriſtianity builds its ſecond great commandment, love of our neighbour, a duty, enjoined in a higher degree, and carried to a greater extent, though ſtill a reaſonable one, in ſcripture, than in any other inſtitution of religion. It preſcribes the moſt diligent and tender attention to the obligations which reſult from

§ Luke xviii. 11, 13.

from the nearer connections in life, the moſt induſtrious endeavours to be uſeful in whatever ſtation we fill, the moſt affectionate faithfulneſs to the community of which we are members, tempered with univerſal good-will to the reſt of mankind: benevolent reſpect towards thoſe who excel us; readineſs to pardon, as far as can be ſafe, all who have wronged us; eſteem of whatever in any perſon deſerves it; ſincerely kind wiſhes to thoſe whom we eſteem the leaſt; compaſſion for the wretched, and relief to our utmoſt ability, though we ſtraiten ourſelves. Nor doth our bleſſed Redeemer expect us only to pity, as he did, the temporal wants of men; but, as he did alſo, their ſpiritual ones unſpeakably more; a precept peculiar to the goſpel, and comprehending a great variety of important particulars: proviſion for inſtructing the young and ignorant; and combining afterwards pious advice with outward relief to the ſick and needy; ſeaſonable warnings, and mild reproof, when there is hope of their being regarded; conſtant circumſpection to ſet a prudent, as well as innocent example; that we lead not others into danger, by what, perhaps, we can do ourſelves with ſafety; but ſubmit to conſiderable reſtraints, rather than let *our liberty*, as the apoſtle expreſſes it, *become a ſtumbling block to them that are weak* *. Studying to obſerve theſe rules, for they require and merit ſtudy, is *ſeeking the things that are Jeſus Chriſt's*. And they are oppoſed to our own, not as being really contrary even to our preſent intereſt: very far from it. Only through the inbred diſorder of our hearts, and the general prevalence of evil habits, we are apt to delight in very oppoſite diſpoſitions: and hence a good life comes to be a ſelf-denying one, which elſe would be the conſtant practice of ſelf-love. The ambitious would *ſeek the* true *honour that cometh from God* †; the ſelfiſh would *have reſpect to the* heavenly *recompence of reward* ‡: the lovers of pleaſure would ſecure the *fulneſs of joy* which is *for evermore* §: and the means of being happy here and hereafter would evidently appear to be the ſame. But now the difficulties of performing our duty are ſo great, and our failures in it ſo many, that amongſt *the things that are Jeſus Chriſt's*, we muſt ſeek with peculiar earneſtneſs his grace to ſtrengthen us, and

* 1 Cor. viii. 9. † John v. 44. ‡ Heb. xi. 26.
§ Pſal. xv. 12.

and an intereſt in his merits to procure us acceptance, which thus the weakeſt and worſt of us all may be ſure of obtaining.

Yet, great as theſe bleſſings are, the apoſtle hath ſaid, that *all men ſeek their own, not the things of Jeſus Chriſt.* Let us therefore,

III. Examine into the meaning and the truth of this melancholy aſſertion.

It is plainly not to be taken in the utmoſt extent. For he d given the contrary character of *Timothy*, juſt before, as hath of others elſewhere. But he may well be underſtood ſay, that all abſolutely have ſome ſhare of blame in this re- ct: and the generality, which in common ſpeech the word frequently ſignifies, are highly and dangerouſly blameable. who can deny this to be fact? Many are vicious in every that inclination prompts them to. Many, who regard parts of virtue, diſregard others, perhaps avowedly. The uniformly regular would do well to aſk themſelves, her it is from a real inward ſenſe of duty, or for the ſake putation or convenience? They who make a conſcience of ring right in common life, do they make any of paying onour to God? our ſtrongeſt obligations of every kind him: yet numbers think highly of their own merit, they neglect him; and, it may be, pique themſelves on ting him. If we profeſs ourſelves believers in him, do edly and fervently pray to him, and give him thanks daily bleſſings? do we live in his fear and love, and e of his future mercy? Suppoſing we ſincerely embrace religion; have we carefully enquired into the truth of nity; unprejudiced by attachment to forbidden plea- the vain fancy, that nothing can be true which we end not fully, by ludicrous or ſophiſtical miſrepreſenta- And, to guard us againſt theſe, have we conſulted pro- s and perſons? If we call ourſelves Chriſtians, do we conſcientiouſly all the inſtitutions of chriſtianity; or m when any trifle intervenes: and do we obſerve them than as mere forms? Do we uſe them to impreſs on the importance of the doctrines, the pardon, the e rewards of the goſpel? And do we employ our l theſe things to improve us in every part of a Chriſ- r? This temper, and our inclinations, too often inter-

fere

fere. Which do we prefer? and where do we lay the foundation of our conduct? We ought not to lay it in attention to our own intereſts or amuſements, joining now and then with them a little appearance, or perhaps a little reality, of religion, provided we can make it agree with them. But the rule is, *ſeek ye firſt the kingdom of God, and his righteouſneſs* *. The ground-work of every thing good, is a devout reſolution to do our whole duty. Each is to do it ſuitably to his own ſtation: but all, in whatever ſtation, high or low, are to make it their inviolable concern: for God *hath given no man licence to ſin* †. Whoever doth not feel this truth, as the moſt important one that belongs to his exiſtence; and govern his conduct by it, in trying as well as ordinary caſes, hath not *ſought the things of Jeſus Chriſt* in a due manner. And think then, I entreat you, how few have. A ſad reflection! but we muſt remind our hearers to make it. Elſe how much pleaſanter would it be to congratulate the good on their happy ſtate, than to terrify the wicked; to encourage the modeſt and timorous, than to confute the preſumptuous, and alarm the thoughtleſs!

But, ſuch being the condition of the world, let us now conſider,

IV. What we are to learn from it.

And certainly we ought to learn great mildneſs towards others, who are faulty; ſince, more or leſs, all are ſo. Even the firſt Chriſtians, even the firſt of the Chriſtian clergy, for of theſe, it muſt be owned, the apoſtle peculiarly ſpeaks in the text, fell very ſhort of perfection. And ever ſince, the beſt have had their defects, and the worſt their good qualities. Let us therefore think and hope, as well as with any reaſon we can, of all. Yet ſtill, they who abandon themſelves to wickedneſs, and eſpecially they who labour to pervert others, either in principles or practice, and to make a bad world worſe, be they ever ſo agreeable, be they ever ſo uſeful to us, are to be avoided, and checked with more care, the more danger there is of their doing harm. That we are unable, from various circumſtances, to exert this right ſpirit, may ſometimes, perhaps often, be a juſt plea: but ought never to be made a falſe pretence. The firm purpoſe of doing it ſhould always be kept in mind, and executed as ſoon as poſſible, with amends for the delay.

* Matth. vi. 33. † Eccluſ. xv. 20.

lay. At the ſame time, in proportion that the bad give
al marks of reformation, they ſhould be diligently encourag-
, yet with prudent, and cautious, and gradual kindneſs. But
ove all, the honeſt, the virtuous, the conſcientious, the pious,
ght to be countenanced, brought forward, and cheriſhed, as
ſalt and the light of the earth *, who preſerve ſociety from
ruption and diſſolution, who ſhew men the way to preſent
future happineſs. Nor ſhould they be rejected or deſpiſed,
ugh ſometimes inferior in qualifications of leſs moment,
, though, in ſome reſpects, hurting, through miſtake, their
good cauſe: of which, however, it is very unjuſt, though
uſual, to condemn or ſuſpect them, without or beyond
on.

at the principal point is, what we are to learn in regard
immediately to ourſelves. If the world be ſo bad, there
eat need to aſk our hearts, what are we who make a part
Conforming to it implicitly is by no means the rule
of ſcripture or of reaſon; yet is it not too much our
ce? A little honeſt enquiry would ſoon furniſh the true
r. But we turn our eyes from what we have no mind
cern, and try to deceive not only others but ourſelves.
what end? God knows the truth. Men will know it,
r do not; and angels too. We ourſelves know it in
l the while; and ſhall know and lament it to eternity,
efuſe to take the proper notice of it in time.

nine therefore what the tenour of your conduct is. If
ſolute or intemperate, the neceſſity of amending it is
ly viſible. If, though otherwiſe innocent, you conſume
ys chiefly in trifles; ſuch waſte of precious time, given
r ends, is highly criminal. Beſides that, both the ſu-
idolent, and the buſier votaries of idle amuſements,
emſelves to various temptations, and ſet a dangerous
to thoſe around them: the tendency of which, as it
muſt be to make perſons of all ranks, even the moſt
t, and, by conſequence, the community compoſed
inſignificant, contemptible, and vicious. Further
ugh your diſpoſition be to things of more uſe, and ſo
mendable, yet if on any occaſion you indulge either
t or malevolence, however calm, towards any of
t.

* Matth. v. 13, 14.

your fellow-creatures; if you are injurious or hard-hearted, from ſelfiſhneſs; or but thoughtleſsly inattentive to the rights, the intereſts, the wants, the feelings of thoſe whom you ought to regard, you may thus have contracted, in many ways, moſt heinous degrees of guilt. Nay, ſuppoſing you have been, and are, beneficent as well as harmleſs, but leſs ſo than you might; even this defect is a failure of duty. Not that you are to give way to ſcruples; there is no end of them: but to conſider maturely, and conſult worthy friends; what you can add to the good which you do already. Poſſibly it may be more than you imagine. Be it ever ſo little, do it but according to the beſt of your judgment, and God will accept it. But, at the ſame time, be ſure to remember, that the righteſt demeanor in worldly matters will not ſuffice; but our chief regard muſt be to him who made us, and whoſe therefore we are. From his goodneſs all that we enjoy proceeds: from his authority over us all our duties flow: and thoſe, which are owing immediately to himſelf, ſurely require our principal care. But ſuch duties as natural reaſon teaches, are far from being the only concern of thoſe to whom he hath preſcribed additional ones, founded on the important alterations which our primitive ſtate, as we learn from ſcripture, hath undergone. Man is a fallen creature: *We are dead*, as the apoſtle ſtrongly expreſſes it, *and our life is hid with Chriſt in God* *. Our hope of future happineſs lies not in ourſelves, but is repoſited in the hands of the bleſſed *Jeſus*, who purchaſed it with his blood: and *where our treaſure is there muſt our hearts be alſo* †. Without affectionate and habitual movements of the ſoul towards the father of mercy, the author of ſalvation, the inſpirer of holineſs; without a deep ſenſe of paſt guilt and preſent imperfection, an humble faith in the merits of our glorified Redeemer, and a firm reliance on the grace of the divine comforter, all our virtue, all our piety, will avail us nothing. For, when we have done our beſt, *we are* but *unprofitable ſervants* ‡.

You will object, perhaps, that indulging contemplations of this nature would engroſs our whole thoughts and time: the affairs of common life muſt be utterly neglected for them. But are you indeed at all near the borders of that danger? Or do not ſuch objectors take thorough care to keep far enough out

* Col. iii. 3. † Matth. vi. 21. Luke xii. 34. ‡ Luke xvii. 10.

out of the reach of it? You are by no means called only to acts of devotion, or only to the more ſublime of moral duties. Prudent and moderate concern for our worldly intereſt is a duty. Every propriety and decency of life is a duty. Even ornamental accompliſhments have their value. But from theſe conceſſions men conclude, that they may ſafely pay their main attention to what deſerves but the ſmalleſt part; and imagine they are abundantly good chriſtians, almoſt without any one peculiarly chriſtian action or ſentiment. At beſt, a few pious formalities, practiſed now and then, conſtitute their whole religion: and the reſt of their life, and all their heart, is given up to what hath no tincture of religion in it: whereas inward reverence of God, as he is manifeſted to us in the goſpel of *Jeſus Chriſt*, ought to be our ruling principle; and extend its influence throughout each article, of our buſineſs, our converſation, and private thoughts.

Perhaps you will object again, that ſo very ſerious a turn of mind as this, will caſt a gloom over every thing: and one muſt have ſome pleaſure ſurely. But learn to be pleaſed with what you ought: and you will have inexpreſſibly more pleaſure than you poſſibly can elſe. In other things you take pains, no ſmall pains, to acquire a taſte; often, for what is of no value; ſometimes, for what is bad: and perhaps, after all, can ſucceed no further, than to put on the affectation of taſte for what you really do not, or get by habit a wretched craving for gratifications, which you cannot but deſpiſe and condemn.

Employ yourſelves better. Eſteem what is eſtimable, and it will exalt inſtead of debaſing you: love what is amiable, and it will reward your affection. *Love him* above all, becauſe he *firſt loved you**; and his ſervice will be delightful: for ſuch as he requires, and you will find ſatisfaction in every thing. It is a ſtrange miſtake, to imagine the burthens of religion inſupportable; while we take much heavier upon ourſelves from fancy and faſhion. Were the goſpel to injoin all theſe purſuits, the expences, the dangers, which on reflexion we now receive caprice and cuſtom do, that one argument againſt it muſt be accounted deciſive.

The moſt ſerious perſon in the world may juſtly be alſo the moſt fulleſt. Even penitents, in the midſt of their ſorrow, in every beginning of their amendment, enjoy a bleſſed

* 1 John iv. 19.

hope of forgiveneſs and acceptance, infinitely preferable to the higheſt pleaſures of ſin. But perſons of confirmed goodneſs have a *peace* within their breaſts, *which paſſeth all underſtanding** of thoſe who have not experienced it, and all deſcription of thoſe who have. They feel no tormenting remorſe, no diſquieting dread of God or man. They are never agitated by malice or envy: ſeldom, and but gently, moved by anger. Pity indeed they often experience; but gratifying it comforts both others and themſelves. Their behaviour is friendly, and therefore agreeable: their diſcourſe lively, if nature hath qualified them for it; but at leaſt inoffenſive and conciliating. Their hearts are open, in a proper degree, to all the innocent amuſements of life, and they long for none of the prohibited ones. Virtuous diſcretion preſerves their health and ſpirits as much as worldly uncertainties permit, makes their circumſtances eaſy, their families and dependants orderly and happy. Their judicious beneficence is very uſeful, their blameleſs example yet more. Thus they become bleſſings within the compaſs of their ſphere: and ſurely reap no little joy from the eſteem of others, but unſpeakably more from the teſtimony of their own conſciences. The beſt of them indeed are ſenſible of many failings: but all conſiſtent with that ſincerity, which God, they know, will recompenſe. They ſee through the whole courſe of life, that they are in the only right way; and whatever may happen to them, all will end well. Diſappointments, unkindneſs, ingratitude, loſſes of friends or of fortune, neceſſity, pain, ſickneſs, and death, *work together for their good*†, and unite to form an infallible plan for encreaſing their final felicity. Never will ſociety grow gloomy, but inexpreſſibly the cheerfuller, for being compoſed of ſuch perſons as theſe: and ſuch ought the religious naturally to be.

Therefore you, who are truly religious, appear in character, and do credit to your cauſe. Deſpiſe with good humour and pity the impotent ridicule of the inconſiderate: let the world ſee that you are happy, and that your belief in God is the ground of it. Wear no dejected looks, put on no forbidding appearances; be affable, be courteous, be joyful. Avoid improper amuſements; guard againſt fondneſs for theſe in which occaſionally you may do well to join: but expreſs a decent

* Phil. iv. 7. † Rom. viii. 28.

a decent and modeſt, a mild and compaſſionate, not an angry or cenſorious, diſapprobation of the common exceſſes in them; ſhew that you can reliſh life perfectly well without them, by engaging with alacrity in the proper buſineſs of your ſtation, improving yourſelves, and doing good to others. Never unſeaſonably magnify in talk, but aſſiduouſly demonſtrate in fact, the comfort you have in obſerving the precepts and expecting the rewards of the goſpel. Manifeſt, whenever opportunities preſent themſelves, yet without any oſtentation, the benevolent ſerenity which chriſtian faith inſpires, your enjoyment both of converſation and ſolitude in their ſeaſons, your compoſure under doubts and uncertainties, your fortitude under croſſes and afflictions, and your ſettled perſuaſion, that you ſhall ever be enabled to *poſſeſs your ſoul in gladneſs of heart**, and rejoice *in the Lord alway*†.

Such behaviour will ſurely convince even the vicious and the prejudiced, if they have any reflection, that to ſeek their own advantage with ſucceſs, they muſt *ſeek the things which are Jeſus Chriſt's*. And if they ever intend it, the preſent time is always the beſt: but this preſent time is peculiarly ſo. Decency prohibits now the uſual diverſions: apply your vacant hours to a better purpoſe. The offices of the week throughout exp eſs in the moſt affecting manner, what your gracious Redeemer hath done and ſuffered for you: think deliberately in it, what you ought to do for him, indeed for yourſelves. Think what you have been, and are, and what the faith you profeſs requires you to be: conſider what fatal conſequences will follow, perhaps very ſoon, if you neglect to amend, and how you ſhall accompliſh this neceſſary work. Read with reverence the rules and declarations of God's word; read with attention other awakening, yet prudent books, reflecting as you go along: and engage ſome pious, but judicious friend, to excite, ſupport, direct, and, if there be occaſion, reſtrain you. Form diſcreetly by their helps needful reſolutions: and beg earneſtly of God's ſtrength to fulfil them: elſe they will all prove ineffectual. But remember, that the piety of the week, however ſtrict, is not to end with it; and cannot be really chriſtian, if it doth. You are called to recollection

* Luke xxi. 19. Acts ii. 46. † Phil. iv. 4.

collection now, that you may practiſe vigilance all the reſt of your days. Temporary, periodical *goodneſs*, that *is like the morning cloud, and as the early dew goeth away**, it will be of no avail to any one; but they, *who, by patient continuance in well-doing, ſeek for glory and honour and immortality*, are ſecure of obtaining *eternal life*†.

* Hoſ. vi. 4. †Rom. ii. 7.

SERMON LIX.

The Joy and Exultation of St. Paul in Publishing the Doctrines and Precepts of Christianity.

Gal. vi. 14.

But God forbid that I ſhould glory, ſave in the croſs of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt; by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

WE muſt have ſome foundation, real or imagined, for thinking well of ourſelves and our condition; or we muſt be wretched. And innumerable are the methods which men take to procure the eſteem of their own minds. Too many *glory in their ſhame**: are proud of notions and diſcourſes, which miſrepreſent ſacred truths, degrade human nature, and tend to diſſolve human ſociety; of gratifying their paſſions, their appetites, their fancies, whatever miſchiefs it produces; of doing what viſibly hurts, and muſt finally ruin their characters, their fortunes, their healths, their ſouls. Others value themſelves on more plauſible, yet inſufficient, pretentions: on the luſtre of an ancient family, which perhaps they diſgrace; on the inheritance or acquiſition of wealth, which they employ to little or no good purpoſe; on agreeableneſs of perſon, which makes them vain and imprudent the ſhort time it continues, and miſerable when it decays; on livelineſs of wit, which either provokes enemies, or invites dangerous friends; on depth of knowledge, often falſely ſo called, and pernicious, often wholly foreign to their true buſineſs; on elegance of taſte in ſmaller matters, while they are contemptibly injudicious in the greateſt; on pomp and ſhew, which give a pleaſure as fleeting as it is childiſh; on making a figure in the

* Phil. iii. 19.

the idle hurry of amuſements, which encroaches on every valuable purpoſe of life, and wears out the ſpirits under pretence of raiſing them; on the favour of the great, by whatever arts attained, and however precarious; or on the ſeemingly more ſolid poſſeſſion of power, which it is hard to abſtain from uſing ill, and extremely hard to uſe in a due meaſure well; which diſobliges by the exerciſe of it many more than it can poſſibly oblige; is accompanied with perpetual fatigue and uneaſineſs, yet with perpetual envy: cauſes innumerable vexations while it laſts; and yet commonly grievous regret when it is gone.

If all theſe be wrong grounds of ſelf-complacency, how few of us have right ones! There are thoſe, however, who profeſs to build it on ſomething more ſubſtantial, on virtue. But, alas! the virtue of great numbers conſiſts almoſt wholly in ſpecious words, honour, benevolence, good-nature, which are either a mere ornament of their talk, or influence their behaviour only on ſome occaſions, or to ſome perſons. And the more uniformly well inclined towards others are often ſtrangely addicted to blameable indulgence of themſelves: or, however inoffenſive otherwiſe, are lamentably defective in the diſcipline of the heart, particularly in forming it to that deep humility, which becomes duſt and aſhes. If we think too highly of ourſelves, we ſhall be fatally miſled: and, if we think reaſonably, we ſhall experience the daily mortification of being faulty, more or leſs, even in thoſe things for which we are applauded. Beſides, our virtue itſelf will frequently oblige us to do what others will diſlike, oppoſe, revenge. Or, though we eſcape ſuch evils, yet the unavoidable ones of fear, ſorrow, languor, pain, ſickneſs, death, are uſually more than enough to make our preſent ſtate a pitiable, rather than a glorious one, if the conſciouſneſs of our own rectitude be our whole ſupport under them.

Wiſer men, therefore, in their ſearch of comfort, look beyond themſelves to God. And, indeed, faith in him, provided it repreſents him as a righteous governor, obſerving, diſtinguiſhing, and recompenſing, unſpeakably dignifies our condition, and adds importance to our proſpects. But ſtill, our beſt obedience being only his due, and paid only out of what we have received from him, we could neither boaſt nor merit, though

though it were perfect: and what his free goodneſs would beſtow on us even then, beyond ſecurity from their being ſufferers on the whole, reaſon could never aſcertain.

Or, were the innocent aſſured by it of ever ſo great rewards; are we innocent? Thoughtleſs preſumption may anſwer haſtily in the affirmative: but what doth the deliberate voice of conſcience ſay, after a faithful ſcrutiny of our paſt actions, words, and thoughts, as in the divine preſence? Such and ſo many as our duties are, of love, reverence, and reſignation to our Maker, of juſtice, equity, goodneſs, in the numerous relations of life, virtuous command of our various inclinations, careful uſe and upright government of our underſtanding; have we been always as blameleſs in each of them, as infinite purity can demand of us, though we ſee that no one round us hath? If not, let us remember it, we are ſinners, and ſin deſerves puniſhment. *God forbid* then *that we ſhould glory in* our moral or religious characters: God grant we may find mercy for our failures in them.

But how can reaſon aſſure us that we ſhall? Doth it know, what the holineſs of his nature, the honour of his government, the admonition of other parts of his creation, may render needful? Sorrow for what is paſt cannot annihilate it: and living well for the time to come, though it were not mixed, as what we call ſo is, with perpetual faults, no more makes amends for paſt tranſgreſſions, than avoiding to incur new debts pays off the old. Still our hearts dictate hope. But hope, far from being certainty, is not ſo much as perſuaſion. And though pardon were unqueſtionable, future happineſs, much leſs eternal, would not. The poſſibilities therefore, the probabilities of theſe things, which nature can ſuggeſt, how reviving ſoever, compared with abſolute deſpondency, *have* to chriſtians, as the apoſtle ſpeaks in a ſimilar caſe, *no glory by reaſon of the glory that excelleth**: they fade away and vaniſh before his *precious promiſes*†, who *was delivered for our offences, and raiſed again for our juſtification*‡.

Here then we have ſure ground for glorying: not in ourſelves indeed; for we have contributed nothing to this merciful diſpenſation, beſides falling into the extremeſt need of it by our offences;

* 2 Cor. iii. 10. † 2 Pet. i. 4. ‡ Rom. iv. 25.

offences: but *Chriſt Jeſus is made unto us of God, wiſdom, and righteouſneſs, and ſanctification, and redemption, that, as it is written, he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord**. We have only to embrace, with acknowledged unworthineſs, the gracious offer of our heavenly Father, on the equitable conditions annexed to it.

But we muſt embrace the whole, not part only. Multitudes profeſs to reſpect the goſpel very highly, for its many rational doctrines, its holy and mild precepts, its intereſting ſanctions, its proviſion for inſtructing mankind, the good example of its publiſher, its declarations of forgiveneſs, nay perhaps alſo for its aſſurances of inward aſſiſtance. But of the efficacy of what our Redeemer underwent to procure theſe benefits, they entertain the loweſt conceptions: raiſe difficulties on every article of *the great myſtery of godlineſs*†, and explain away the ſcripture doctrine of it into nothing: ſtrive to form a chriſtianity as as much as poſſible without Chriſt, and be ſaved, if not by their own merits, however not by his. Therefore the apoſtle in the text lays the ſtreſs where it really lies: *God forbid, that I ſhould glory* in any thing, *ſave in the* CROSS *of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt*: in his ſubmiſſion to die upon it, not merely as a confirmation of his ſincerity, which puts his and his apoſtles martyrdoms almoſt on a level, but as a propitiatory offering, by *which*, to ſpeak the language of holy writ, *he hath reconciled us to God, making peace by the blood of his cr oſs, in the body of his fleſh through death*‡. That he appeared on earth to eſtabliſh true religion there, bore the inconveniences of this mortal ſtate, *endured the contradiction of ſinners*§, and yielded up his life to their malice, is the univerſal belief of all chriſtians: and why might not God, foreſeeing theſe things from eternity, graciouſly accept his condeſcending to them for our ſakes, though otherwiſe wholly foreign to a nature united to the divine, as a ſacrifice offered on our behalf to infinite juſtice: beſtowing on the prieſt and victim the moſt acceptable retribution that he could poſſibly receive, the right of pardoning, reforming, and making eternally happy, as many as ſhould throw themſelves on the mercy thus tendered them, and prove the ſincerity of their thankful faith, by that of their obedience? We

* 1 Cor. i. 30, 31. † 1 Tim. iii. 16. ‡ Col. i. 20, 21, 22. § Heb. xii. 23.

We are far from pretending to know all the reaſons of a tranſaction, *into which* even *angels deſire to look**: yet ſurely conſiderate minds may trace in it evident footſteps of holineſs, goodneſs, wiſdom: but at leaſt humble hearts will recollect, that *the* imagined *fooliſhneſs of God is wiſer than men*†; and finding, as every one living muſt on due ſearch, that they have no cauſe to glory in themſelves, will *glory* moſt cordially *in the croſs of Jeſus Chriſt*: aſcribing to his interceſſion their forgiveneſs, to his ſtrength their good actions, to his merits their reward. *Not by works of righteouſneſs, which we have done, but according to his mercy, God ſaveth us, by the waſhing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghoſt, which he ſheds on us abundantly through Chriſt Jeſus our Saviour, that being juſtified by his grace, we ſhould be made heirs of eternal life*‡. *Bleſſing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that ſitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever*§.

But then we cannot be intitled to ſuch exultation, unleſs we are qualified as the latter part of the text intimates. *Faith* indeed *ſaveth us*‖, but that alone *which worketh by love*¶, to God, to our fellow creatures, to every thing good: which cannot conſiſt with a ruling love to the ways of an evil world. Therefore St. *John* ſaith, *if any man love the world*, that is, preferably, *the love of the Father is not in him***; and St. *Paul* only expreſſes the ſame meaning a little more ſtrongly, when he reminds us by his own example, that *we* muſt *be crucified*, dead, *to the world, and it to us*††: we muſt ſacrifice all inordinate fondneſs for it to him, who ſacrificed himſelf on the croſs for our ſalvation; and mortally hate whatever is wrong in it, at the riſque of being mortally hated by it. Still the comforts of life, which God hath provided for us, are to be enjoyed with duly proportioned gladneſs and thankfulneſs: the ſubordinations of life are to be maintained, the common buſineſs of it followed, the proprieties and civilities of it preſerved, and perverſe non-compliances diligently avoided. But, when all this is done, much will remain to be renounced and *crucified*. For as St. *John* hath admoniſhed us, *we are of God, and the whole world*, even what calls itſelf the chriſtian world, *lieth in*

* 1 Pet. i. 12. † 1 Cor. i. 25. ‡ Tit. iii. 5, 6, 7.
§ Rev. v. 13. ‖ Eph. ii. 8. ¶ Gal. v. 6.
** 1 John ii. 15. †† Gal. vi. 14.

*wickedneſs**: powerfully encouraging every bad thing, to which our appetites and paſſions prompt us, and many to which they do not.

Faſhion makes ſome men miſſionaries of infidelity, objecting againſt religion, even what they know to be falſe: others, implicit believers in them, to ſhew their own freedom of thought: and a third ſort, utterly negligent of every act of piety, without ſo much as imagining they know why. Faſhionable honour urges men to demands of ſatisfaction, equally wicked and abſurd, often for no injury at all. Faſhionable diſcourſe abounds with oaths and imprecations, and irreverent uſes of the moſt ſacred names, not leſs fooliſh than profane; or, if clear of this fault, commonly ſets the whole of what we are concerned to believe and do, in a miſtaken light. Faſhionable extravagance conſumes in gaming, and luxury, and idle expences, what ought to provide for our families, for the worthy and the poor. Faſhionable gratifications of the various pleaſures of ſenſe defeat the chief end of man's being. Even more innocent faſhionable amuſements ſwallow up that precious time, of which we ſhould be frugal for better purpoſes. Faſhionable hours interfere with the order of nature, with the public worſhip of God, with the regular diſpoſition of all ſorts of affairs. And faſhionable complaiſance places the vileſt of human beings on the ſame footing with the moſt unexceptionable, to the dreadful weakening of the eſſential diſtinction between good and evil.

Yet in all theſe matters men will follow, with ſtrange inconſiderateneſs, even the profligate. But they conceive themſelves fully authorized to imitate, in every thing, ſuch as common ſpeech calls decent and reputable: titles, in ſome ages, to be had exceeding cheap. In one ſex eſpecially, and the other is copying after it, very ſmall remnants, even of moral virtue, will ſuffice: and in the upper part of both, yet leſs of religion, if any at all, is needful. Accordingly many, who, from conſcience, preſerve ſome forms of it, rather look deſirous to have them thought mere forms, and are wondefuly ſhy of uttering a word to ſhew the contrary: paſs off any mention of their regard to it as ſlightly as may be, and are content to let others treat

* 1 John v. 19.

treat it with as much indignity as they will: inſtead of *glorying in the croſs of Chriſt, aſhamed to confeſs him before men*, though he hath paſſed on that ſhame ſo awful a ſentence*; and perfectly indifferent whether piety hath the ſupport, which they muſt know it wants, provided they can make an acceptable figure to thoſe around them; a point about which they are as ſolicitous, as if the apoſtle had ſaid, *be ye conformed to this world*, inſtead of, *be ye not*†. Perhaps the more ſeriouſly educated ſcruple going at once the utmoſt lengths of the mode in wrong things: but are gradually familiarized to follow their leaders from one ſtep to another, till they advance imperceptibly to a frightful diſtance from their firſt ſetting out; and it may be at laſt grow ambitious of being leaders in their turn of a little world of their own, that ſhall tempt the great one into ſtill worſe enormities.

Through the whole of this giddy progreſs, innumerable attentions, and incredibly earneſt ones, to moſt inſignificant matters, fill their hearts, and expel or deaden every devout and virtuous feeling. If they find leiſure to reflect on their conduct, it is chiefly to invent excuſes and palliations: if they ſtill go to church, it is without deſire of improving there: nay, if they ſtill pray in private, which probably few of them continue long, it is little more than repeating thoughtleſsly a few good words: and thus, by degrees, they come to have no real affection or veneration for their Creator, their Redeemer, their Sanctifier, no penitent ſenſe of their own imperfections or tranſgreſſions, no practical or ſteady perſuaſion of future recompences; but form their whole manner of talking and judging, as if the preſent ſtate were all: are extremely eager about their worldly intereſts and pleaſures, but equally unconcerned about the rightneſs of their diſpoſitions: will on no account be abſent from a meeting for buſineſs which they have at heart, or a gay aſſembly to which they are invited, let their health or what will ſuffer: but neglect the appointed ſeaſons of divine worſhip, on the pooreſt pretences, or without any: crowd buſineſs, journeys, diverſions, into the moſt ſacred ſeaſons, contrary to the excellent ends of their inſtitution, contrary to all law, and all ſhame; but would think their reputations undone by going to the houſe of God, at any unuſual time, or even making, with ſeriouſneſs,

* Matth. x. 32, 33. Mark viii. 38. Luke xi. 26. xii. 8, 9.
† Rom. xii. 2.

ſerionſneſs, a momentary acknowledgement to him over their daily food: conſult neither ſcripture nor reaſon to diſcover their duty: but make the artfulleſt uſe of either, to fence againſt what they are unwilling to own for ſuch; or, if need be, avowedly prefer the opinion and practice of the world to both, diſdainful rebels againſt heaven, but mean-ſpirited ſlaves to they ſcarce know whom.

Yet moſt of them tolerate, and perhaps approve, ſome appearances of religion, eſpecially in ſome perſons; but ſuſpect any great reality of it, as a degree of madneſs: have the utmoſt terrors of ſeeing this poor land over-run with enthuſiaſm and ſuperſtition; but not the ſmalleſt dread of profaneneſs and profligateneſs: are ſtartled at any new declarations of authority againſt either, but comforted by the hope, that they will prove ineffectual, and all go on as it did: read almoſt any thing written to depreciate chriſtianity, and relax moral virtue, but almoſt nothing in favour of them; are very cautious of meddling with treatiſes of piety, however judiciouſly compoſed, for fear of turning their heads, but devour ever ſo many idle and even laſcivious books, without the leaſt apprehenſion of corrupting their hearts: allow themſelves to be much more expenſive in the vain-glorious diſplay of private magnificence, or towards the ſupport of entertainments called polite, though neither of good tendency nor good taſte, than liberal to the trueſt charities: or, how bountiful ſoever to the temporal diſtreſſes of their brethren, have no compaſſion at all for their ſpiritual wants: nay, perhaps, have made formal reſolutions of giving nothing to ſuch and ſuch pious uſes, againſt which it is grown cuſtomary to inveigh, and hear no anſwer.

Yet many of them had originally no reliſh for this turn of thinking and acting: indeed ſtill rather affect to ſeem, than really are happy in it; nay, poſſibly feel tormenting doubts from time to time how it will end. But theſe they are taught to conſider as mere fits of gloomineſs, which they muſt diſſipate by every mirthful avocation they can invent, and learn to deſpiſe themſelves for ever having been in ſo ſtrange a ſtate of mind, and ſo unſuitable to living in good company. Or, if reflection will, notwithſtanding, be troubleſome, arguments muſt be ſought for to quiet it. And accordingly they do argue,

that

that mens ſtations, connexions, and ſpirits require ſome relaxation, and they muſt take ſuch as they can get, amongſt thoſe with whom it is to be had. But are they grieved or rejoiced at this pleaded obligation? Do they ſtop at the quantity or the kinds that are really needful, or go beyond them at pleaſure? Are they growing better or worſe all the while? Are they ſetting good examples or bad? Surely theſe are material queſtions. Yet they make a ſhift either to feel or to acknowledge nothing of their force; but whatever they like to join in, peremptorily inſiſt, that it is harmleſs, uſeful, neceſſary, juſt what they pleaſe: yet reſerving a liberty, when once it loſes credit, to cenſure it as abſurd and wrong every way, and be full as fond of ſomething elſe, that deſerves it as little, without confeſſing the leaſt inconſtancy.

For, with the world on their ſide, they come at length, inſtead of apologizing for themſelves, to aſſume a ſovereign authority over others; confute their objections with barely a contemptuous laugh or look, or by fixing on them any name in vogue, that denotes preciſeneſs; attack and perſecute the moſt ſilent nonconformiſts to their notions, and haughtily overbear all that ſtand in their way. Such as worſhip the ſame idol with them, be their characters ever ſo doubtful, muſt not be ſuſpected; be they ever ſo notoriouſly criminal, muſt not be condemned; or counted unfit for their familiar acquaintance, or even particular friendſhip, let the conſequences, private or public, be what they may. The pert ridiculers of religion and virtue are to be allowed abundance of wit in the ſilleſt and groſſeſt things they utter: and the moſt hard-hearted libertines muſt be held to have true good-nature, becauſe they have ſuperficial gaiety. If they ruin themſelves by their vices, they are only to be pitied: if others alſo, they are to be excuſed to the very utmoſt, it is well if not looked on as the more conſiderable. But men who have always been regularly virtuous are to be regarded as objects of deriſion. And ſuch as add to their virtue inward religion, regulate their conduct by it, abſtain from things on account of it; appear to take pleaſure in its doctrines, its ordinances, its promiſes, and give any tokens of what the text calls *glorying in the croſs of Chriſt*, they are to hope from this quarter for a very ſmall ſhare of the charitable candour, which is laviſhed ſo profuſely on others.

Their

Their ſincerity, or their underſtanding, is to be ſtrongly queſtioned: their good diſpoſitions and actions denied, or paſſed over in ſilence, or ſcornfully undervalued: ridiculous and dangerous ſingularities to be imputed to them, on the weakeſt evidence, or none; and if ever they fall into any ſuch, they are to be aggravated beyond truth or credibility; and no plea whatever to be admitted in their favour. So very far are too many from anſwering the Pſalmiſt's deſcription of the man *who ſhall dwell in God's holy hill*, that *in his eyes a vile perſon is contemned, but he honoureth them, that fear the Lord**.

Even an infidel, were he to ſpeak honeſtly, would tell ſuch, that they are no chriſtians. Yet, perhaps, they would be very angry with any one but an infidel for ſaying ſo, and in reality are by no means unbelievers. But why then will they not become conſiſtent? If the goſpel of Chriſt deſerves any regard at all, it deſerves a thorough regard: either it is nothing, or it is the moſt important of all things. And they who profeſs it, yet ſeldom think of it, who are influenced by it, if at all, to ſcarce more than a little outward ſhew, and ſlight and ſcorn the frame of mind which it was intended to create in them, *better had it been for them*, unleſs they amend, *never to have known it*†. All ſorts of perſons are concerned beyond expreſſion to recollect this often: but two ſorts beyond the reſt. If you of the upper part of the world, who have moſt to be thankful and moſt to be anſwerable for, inſtead of being examplary in ſerving God, are remarkable for neglecting his worſhip and his laws; not only the ingratitude, but the perniciouſneſs of your behaviour, will greatly increaſe your puniſhment. And if we of the clergy, who teach others by our exhortations to *ſet their affection on things above, not on things on the earth*‡, teach them the reverſe by our practice: make it our ſtudy to acquire applauſe, or wealth, or power, or rank, to partake of amuſements and diverſions in the poor low degree that for ſhame we can, or enjoy ourſelves in ſome graver kind of voluptuous indolence; to do any thing, in ſhort, but labour diligently in God's vineyard from firſt to laſt for the good of ſouls; we ſhall receive a double condemnation. And they who patronize any ſuch of us, will ſhare deeply in our guilt.

It

* Pſ. xv. 1, 4. † 2 Pet. ii. 21. ‡ Col. iii. 2.

It is not rigour that dictates any of theſe aſſertions to me. It was not auſterity, but the tendereſt compaſſion, that moved St. *Paul* to ſay, *for many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the croſs of Chriſt, who mind earthly things* *: not always deſigned enemies, but real ones however. Our Saviour hath told us, *he that is not with me, is againſt me* †. And they that will be with him to effect, muſt be with him heartily, openly, and uniformly. We may have qualities very amiable, and do actions very laudable in the eſtimation of men, and yet our hearts be far from *right in the ſight of God* ‡. He requires, as well he may, that we ſhould conſider ourſelves principally as his creatures, as ſinners, as favoured with offers of mercy and of grace, as bound to *live ſoberly, righteouſly, and godly, looking for the bleſſed hope of his glorious appearance* §. However the preference, which the world gives to very different matters, may bouy us up now in overlooking theſe, it will be no protection to us, when *the dead, ſmall and great, ſhall ſtand before God* ¶. And however inſipid or inſupportable a life may appear to ſome, which is to be humbly ſpent in regulating their deſires, doing their duty, and expecting their reward; they will find upon trial, that every other ſcheme produces miſerable diſappointments; and this, as much happineſs as our preſent ſtate is capable of. Length of days, eaſy circumſtances, general eſteem, domeſtic tranquillity, national good order and ſtrength, are the ſmaller advantages that uſually attend practiſing the rules of religion: but the conſtant ones, the calm peace and joyful proſpects of all whoſe minds are duly affected by the genuine principles of it, theſe are bleſſings inexpreſſibly great.

You are not exhorted to begin a new courſe of life, and retain your old inclinations; making yourſelves uneaſy, without making yourſelves better: but to acquire ſuch ſentiments, that you may delight in all you do. The vigorous exerciſe of good ſenſe will contribute not a little to this deſirable end; for, indeed, the ways of the world are often flat contradictions to it. But the fundamental rule is, learn a juſt value for the croſs of Chriſt, for the pity he hath ſhewn, the pardon he hath purchaſed,

* Phil. iii. 18. 19. † Matth. xii. 30. Luke xi. 23. ‡ Acts viii. 21.
§ Tit. ii. 12, 13. ¶ Rev. xx. 12.

chaſed, the felicity he hath provided for you; and you will ſoon come to love the reſtraints and obſervances which he hath appointed, to look with indifference, or ſometimes with diſguſt and abhorrence, on what you have hitherto admired, and find the degree of your ſatisfactions unſpeakably encreaſed, by changing the nature of them from trifling, diſgraceful, and noxious, to rational, noble, and beneficent. Still difficulties there will be, and to ſome perſons peculiar ones, in breaking ſettled habits, and diſſolving the ties by which you have been long held. But God will give you both courage and prudence, to make it eaſier than you think. Though you will do what is right with ſteadineſs, yet you will do it without oſtentation, and with chearful good-humour: ſpeak mildly of others, and keep on as good terms with all men as you ſafely can. But, if you are too ſolicitous to pleaſe them, you will gradually ſlide back, and forget, as thouſands have done to their eternal ruin, your former convictions. Therefore, whenever you feel any, ſuffer them not to die away through inattention, or be choaked by cares and pleaſures, or blaſted by the breath of ſcoffers: but impreſs them on your ſouls immediately and frequently, form reſolutions correſponding to them, and confirm theſe by reading good books, by the converſation and countenance of good perſons, by attendance on God's public ordinances; but eſpecially by fervent private prayer, ſuited to your ſpiritual condition, with this, *out of weakneſs you will be made ſtrong* *: and without this, the ſeemingly firmeſt human purpoſes, think as highly of them as you will, can never be effectual. *For God reſiſteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble* †.

* Heb. xi. 34. † Jam. iv. 6. 1 Pet. v. 5.

SER.

SERMON LX.

On the Resurrection of Christ, and the Effects of this Event on the Lives and Manners of true Christians.

Col. iii. 1, 2.

If ye then be riſen with Chriſt, ſeek thoſe things which are above, where Chriſt ſitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

THIS day we are met to celebrate the yearly memorial of our bleſſed Lord's riſing from the dead. Now the genuine method of paying honour to every article of our creed, is allowing it the proper influence on our hearts and lives. Chriſt's reſurrection is vain with reſpect to us, unleſs we be raiſed by it to the faith of a better world; and the firmeſt faith of that is vain alſo, unleſs it excite us to love and *ſeek the things which are above*. This paſſage of St. *Paul* therefore is juſtly made one principal part of our *Eaſter day*'s ſervice: and the degree of our practical regard to it will be the true meaſure of our improvement by the diſcipline of the paſt ſeaſon, and of God's acceptance of our celebration of the preſent. That each of theſe then may be ſuch, as we are concerned beyond expreſſion that it ſhould, I ſhall lay before you the chief motives to a due regulation of our deſires and behaviour, in relation to earthly and heavenly objects, which motives ariſe from conſidering ourſelves,

I. As rational beings:

II. As believers in God:

III. As diſciples of Chriſt: on which laſt point I ſhall enlarge the moſt, as it deſerves.

I. Let us conſider ourſelves merely as rational beings, who are to live for a while on earth; and ſuppoſe, that we had no

farther proſpect. Then indeed we could not *ſet our affections on things above*: but ſtill we might ſet them a great deal too much on things below. For, if our attachments to worldly objects be ſtrong, we ſhall frequently, either purſue what is hurtful, or be miſerable that we dare not purſue it, or enraged at being croſſed in our deſigns, or dejected on finding ſmall happineſs in our attainments: which indeed are incapable of yielding much. The delights of ſenſe are deſtructive, when indulged to exceſs: and low and inconſiderable, when conducted with moderation. Wealth and power and rank are acquired with much difficulty, attended with much anxiety, and ſoon become familiar and taſteleſs. Fondneſs for gay amuſements rather makes men uneaſy when they are without them, than gives any mighty pleaſure in the midſt of them: and, unleſs they manage with uncommon prudence, waſtes their fortunes, wears out their ſpirits, hurts their characters, expoſes them to contempt. Indeed we cannot help on reflection contemning ourſelves, for ſetting our hearts on any of theſe gratifications, to the neglect of matters viſibly worthier. But if we follow them to the loſs of our innocence, which generally happens when we follow them earneſtly, then we have cauſe to hate ourſelves too, for tranſgreſſing the dictates of that inward principle, which we feel ought to rule us, and which rewards us, when obeyed, with that pleaſing conſciouſneſs of having acted well, which is the trueſt ſatisfaction we can taſte, though all were to end at death. But even from this enjoyment, without the aid of religion, we can promiſe ourſelves but little. Our failures and imperfections in virtue muſt be daily mortified: our righteſt and kindeſt behaviour will often have ill returns made to it: they whom we love with the moſt deſerved affection, may be miſerable, or may be ſnatched from us: and if not, we muſt very ſoon leave them, and whatever we value. In ſuch circumſtances, diſengagement is evidently the only way of ſecuring any comfort. It will indeed, at the ſame time, render our condition flat and inſipid: but we can aim at nothing better from the things of this world, without meeting with ſomething worſe: and if we are not contented with ſuch a ſtate, (as in truth how can we?) our ſole remedy is to look beyond it: and conſider ourſelves.

II. Not merely as happening to be inhabitants of the duſt of the earth for a few years, we know not how nor why, but

as

as created by the power, and placed under the authority and protection, of a perfectly wiſe, and holy, and good being, who hath made us capable of knowing and honouring, and therefore doubtleſs originally of imitating and obeying, him. On this farther view of things it will plainly appear, that the principle of conſcience, which otherwiſe might often ſerve only to perplex and diſquiet men, is the law of God written in their ſouls; and therefore that yielding to it will always end well: generally in this world, but certainly in another; for which human nature was evidently framed. Here then the diſtinction between *things above* and *things on earth* begins to open, the connection of virtue with happineſs becomes manifeſt; and excites us to diſpiſe the poor ſhort-lived advantages that little minds are fond of; to eſteem and practice what is right, be it ever ſo difficult, or ever ſo unfaſhionable, and devote our entire exiſtence to the adorable author of it. The principal object, beyond compariſon, of one who believes in God, muſt ſurely be God himſelf: and our reverence and love, our dependence and truſt, are ſo to be placed on him, as on nothing elſe in his whole creation. But, above all, ſhould theſe affections be exerted towards him in reſpect of that future recompence which we hope to receive from him. And we are greatly deficient in prudence, as well as gratitude, if we make not that expectation the ſupport and the delight of our lives. But then the temper of heaven muſt be formed in us here, or we can never enjoy it hereafter: and therefore, if we would fix our hearts on any thing above to good purpoſe, we muſt fix them on reſembling him who dwells there, in purity and benevolent goodneſs. Cultivation of theſe diſpoſitions is both an appointed requiſite, and a neceſſary preparative for our ſupreme felicity: whereas immerſing ourſelves in cares, or diſſipating ourſelves in pleaſures, unrelated to piety and virtue, were they ever ſo harmleſs to thoſe around us, muſt be pernicious to ourſelves; rendering our minds either groſs and ſenſual, or trifling and vain; unfit for the enjoyment of ſpiritual bliſs. Every believer then, were it only of ſo much as nature teaches, muſt think it his primary concern to cheriſh religious ſentiments. And though he were uncertain of the truth of his belief, yet, in a caſe of ſuch infinite importance, there could be no doubt of his obligation to chuſe the ſafer ſide. But, without farther guidance, though he were not under

der that neceſſity, he muſt be ſubject to others, and very alarming ones. It doth not appear to the eye of unaſſiſted reaſon, what degree, or what duration, of future happineſs we might promiſe ourſelves, even were we innocent: much leſs what ſinners, as we all are, abundantly worſe than moſt of us think, have to expect from the Lord and Judge of all, to the honour of whoſe government repentance and amendment alone may be no adequate ſatisfaction, were they in our power, which perſons left to themſelves have too much experience that they are not; yet however, ſince we are very ſure, that right ſentiments and behaviour muſt make every man's condition better, and wrong ones worſe than it would be elſe; looking up to God, with ſorrow for our tranſgreſſions, with thankfulneſs for his mercy hitherto, and humble hope for it hereafter, muſt be the duty and the intereſt even of thoſe who have no other light than their own underſtandings can afford them. But ſtill the obſcurity of their proſpect muſt greatly diminiſh both their conſolation from it, and its good influence upon them, and fill them with dreadful terrors from time to time. God be thanked, therefore, that we are not left in the darkneſs of natural religion, but bleſt with that view of the things above which proceeds from conſidering ourſelves,

III. As the diſciples of Chriſt. If the goſpel of *Jeſus* be true, and we have innumerable demonſtrations of it, then there is full evidence, that a future ſtate of eternal happineſs beyond expreſſion is attainable by faith in our dear Redeemer, notwithſtanding our paſt ſins, notwithſtanding our preſent infirmities. For having purchaſed for us life by his death, he hath given us aſſurance of it by his reſurrection, and, in effect, raiſed up us at the ſame time with himſelf. *If then we be* thus *riſen with Chriſt, where ſhall our hearts be* but where *our treaſure is**: fixed on him, whoſe compaſſion planned the ſcheme of our ſalvation; on him whoſe love executed it; on him whoſe grace enables us to ſhare in it; on that kingdom of glory, in which we ſhall reign after death; on thoſe heavenly doctrines and precepts, by which we are to prepare ourſelves for it in the mean while? That we *walk not by ſight, but by faith*†; that we *labour not for the meat that periſheth, but for that*

* Matth. vi. 21. Luke xii. 34. † 2 Cor. v. 7.

*that which endureth to eternal life** ; that we *love not the world, neither the things that are in the world*†, but have *our converſation in heaven*‡, as *fellow citizens of the ſaints, and* members *of the houſhold of God*§.

There is a poſſibility indeed of taking ſuch exhortations in too ſtrict a ſenſe, for want of obſerving, that rules, which we are apt to neglect and explain away, muſt be expreſſed in very ſtrong terms to prevent this: and that often in ſcripture, when one thing is commanded, and another ſeemingly prohibited, the prohibition is not intended to be abſolute, but comparative, as in the known inſtance, *I will have mercy, and not ſacrifice*‖: when yet ſacrificing was both lawful and enjoined; but ſtill to be looked on as forbidden, if it came in competition with a precept of more importance. Thus then we are to interpret the direction of withdrawing our hearts from this earth. Not that we ſhould lay aſide the common affairs of life, in order to ſpend our whole time in devotion: diligence in theſe affairs is one great duty of our *heavenly calling*¶. Not that we are reſtrained from uſing the good creatures of God with pleaſure: for he hath *created them to be received with thankſgiving***, and *given us richly all things to enjoy*††. Not that we are to confine ourſelves to mere neceſſaries; for undeterminable ſcruples would ariſe, what are neceſſaries; and as heaven hath provided us more, it would be only perverſeneſs, or weakneſs, to refuſe taking it. Not that induſtry to raiſe and better our worldly condition is blameable; for a bleſſing from above is promiſed to ſuch induſtry. Not that we are to live in a perpetual fright, becauſe it is doubtful, how far preciſely we may gratify our natural deſires in this thing or that: for we ſerve a gracious maſter, who means that we ſhould be always chearful and eaſy in his ſervice, ſo long as to the beſt of our judgements we are faithful in it. Not that we are to think even the gayer accompliſhments of life ſinful: but rather chuſe to make virtue and piety more amiable by them; provided it be only virtue and piety that we adorn with them. Not that we are bound altogether to decline amuſements and diverſions, in which others are immoderate, unleſs example to them, or danger

* John vi. 27. † 1 John ii. 15.
‡ Phil. iii. 20. § Eph. ii. 19
‖ Hoſ. vi. 6. Matth. ix. 13. xii. 7. ¶ Heb. iii. 1.
** 1 Tim. iv. 3. †† 1 Tim. vi. 17.

danger to ourſelves, requires it: for their abuſe doth not of neceſſity make our uſe of them unlawful, nor poſſibly ſometimes unexpedient. Not that we are to meaſure the degree of our goodneſs by that of our auſterities and abſtinences: *for* if I may make a ſmall change in the apoſtle's words, *neither if we eat not, are we the better; nor if we eat, are we the worſe**. *The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteouſneſs and peace and joy in the Holy Ghoſt*†. Much leſs are we to cenſure perſons of a free behaviour: for conſcientious watchfulneſs is very conſiſtent with an unconſtrained appearance; and though *John* the Baptiſt, an excellent man, was rigid and ſtrict; yet our bleſſed Lord, much the ſuperior character, *came eating and drinking*, and converſed familiarly, as a friend, *with publicans and ſinners*‡.

Again: in like manner we are to interpret the direction of *ſetting our affections on things above.* Not that we muſt keep, or ſtrive to keep, our thoughts as intent upon them continually, as we poſſibly can: for neither our condition here, nor indeed our frame, will bear it; which wants daily relaxation as much as nightly reſt; and without it, our ſpirits will be overcome, our health impaired, our temper ſoured; and, by conſequence, more ground loſt in our way to heaven than we hoped to gain. Not that we ſhould doubt of our ſpiritual ſtate, if the movements of our ſouls towards God and our delight in the contemplation of future happineſs, be attended with but little warmth and paſſion; for, though ſtrong religious feelings are perfectly rational, and extremely deſireable, yet ſome tempers are moved but weakly by any thing; and what is preſent, and ſtrikes our ſenſes, will, on the whole, agitate moſt, if not all, of us more, than what is diſtant and natural. Still, if under theſe diſadvantages, we ſo *love God as to keep his commandments*§, from reverent and thankful motives of duty to him, we give him that proof of our attachment, which he requires. Without this, the moſt fervent affections will be unavailable: and with this, the calmeſt, which are often the trueſt and moſt perſevering, will be accepted. Nor, laſtly, are men to diſpair on finding, that regard to a better world is not only, as an inward ſentiment, much cooler, but,

* 1 Cor. viii. 8. † Rom. xiv. 17.
‡ Matth. xi. 19. Luke vii. 34. § 1 John v. 34.

but, as a principle of action, much fainter than they have cauſe to wiſh; and the workings of earthly deſires in their breaſts powerful and vehement. For if the victory be obtained, the reward ſhall be in proportion to the toil of the combat. And though it be not a complete victory, yet if it be a real one, God may enable us to *go on from ſtrength to ſtrength*, till we are *in all things more than conquerors**. Or, at the worſt, failings that will diminiſh our recompence, may by no means forfeit it.

But though a few, who are worthy of the utmoſt regard, have ſo peculiar a ſeriouſneſs and tenderneſs of ſoul, that ſhewing them how gentle and mild in reality the ſeemingly ſevere doctrines of ſcripture are, is requiſite, both to ſecure their peace and direct their conduct: yet the general propenſity is much on the other ſide; and there is moſt need to fear, that when once the precepts on this head have been acknowledged to ſignify nothing impracticable or extreme, they will ſoon be overlooked, as if they ſignified ſcarce any thing at all. Now, it is poſſible to deceive ourſelves with almoſt whatever imagination we will; but ſurely it is not eaſy to think that a ſlight duty, of which the word of God ſpeaks in ſuch terms, as you have already heard: in ſuch declarations as that of St. *John*, *if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him*†, in ſuch parables as that of the rich man, who, not indeed merely for enjoying this life, but for taking it as his portion, and looking no farther, was irreverſibly doomed to the place of torment‡. We may very allowably, in our paſſage through the preſent world, both feel a complacency in the agreeableneſs of the road, and endeavour to procure good accommodations upon it: nay, by moderate attentions of this kind, prudently conducted, we may qualify ourſelves the better, both for the buſineſs allotted us during our journey, and the employment for which we are deſigned at the concluſion of it. But if we turn aſide into every flowery path, and engage in every purſuit that inclination ſuggeſts: if we forget we are travellers, conſider our inns as places of abode, and adopt the land of our pilgrimage for our country: what ſhall we anſwer at the laſt to him, who hath ſent us hither to do his work; limited the time for it; and given us the fulleſt warning, that

* Rom. viii. 37. † 1 John ii. 15. ‡ Luke xvi. 19 &c.

our future condition depends on our preſent induſtry or negligence?

Let us reflect, therefore, whilſt it may avail us, in what manner we are going on. The bulk of mankind, it is neceſſary, ſhould ſpend their days in worldly labours. But then it is equally neceſſary, that theſe ſhould be undertaken from a principle of religion, conducted ſuitably to the laws of religion, and accompanied with the practice of religious duties, public and private. They who plead want of leiſure for devotion, can always find enough for follies and ſins. They who plead want of capacity or inſtruction, have, the meaneſt of them, been taught and learnt the indiſpenſable rules of life: to believe in their Creator, their Redeemer, their Sanctifier; to behave virtuouſly, love mankind, and honour God: doing which, they may offer up to him a life of the loweſt occupations in ſure faith of his acceptance. And if ſo much regard to things above be juſtly required even of theſe; what will be the caſe of their ſuperiors, who voluntarily plunge themſelves ſo deep, either in cares or pleaſures, that he who made them *is not in all their thoughts*[*]; or, if they cannot help ſometimes remembering him, is indolently forgotten again, or ſtudiouſly driven out? It is very true, buſineſs muſt be attended, but always in ſubordination to the one thing needful. Recreations muſt be allowed; but not ſo as to become the great end of our being. What proportion then do our employments of real conſequences bear to our trifling ones: and what ſhare, even of our ſerious hours, do we give to God, to improvement in virtue, to the contemplation of our latter end, to the hope of immortality? Too probably, much may be wanting to fit many of us for our final account. And how joyfully ſoever they who are conſcious of their title to heaven, may partake of the innocent delights on earth: yet it is dreadful to ſee thoſe, who muſt know, if they would reflect, their guilt to be unforgiven, and whoſe ſentence, whatever they imagine, is poſſibly juſt ready to fall upon their heads, running round in a circle of thoughtleſs gaities, inſtead of applying with penitent humility for pardon and grace.

But,

[*] Pſ. x. 4.

But, indeed, were the goodneſs of ſuch examined, as are conceived by others and themſelves to have a great deal, would it not prove to be ſolely or chiefly relative to this world? We do juſtice and ſpeak truth: but is it from any better motive than reputation or convenience? We pity and relieve the ſick and poor: but have we a like concern for the ſpiritual wants of men? We are chaſte and temperate perhaps: but is it becauſe *the pure in heart ſhall ſee God**, or to avoid expence, and diſeaſe, and diſgrace? Our very ſenſe of duty, is it of duty to the author of our beings; or do we not conſider more, what we owe to ourſelves, or other men, than what we owe to him? Our obligations to our fellow-creatures we acknowledge frequently; but, except it be in common a phraſe, that comes now and then out of our mouths without attending to it; when do we expreſs any thankfulneſs, any ſubjection, any relation at all, to the giver of every good gift? Or, if we have ſentiments of this kind now and then, are they vigorous, or are they languid? We beſtow, it may be freely, our money, our time, our pains, to gratify our fancies, or promote our intereſts, or ſerve our friends: what ſhare of theſe do we employ to ſupport the cauſe of religion, to advance the divine honour? Temporal diſappointments fill us with the deepeſt ſorrow: but do even tranſgreſſions, and eſpecially do failings and imperfections in chriſtian virtues, affect us in any degree approaching to it? And would not a conſiderable ſolicitude on ſuch an account appear to ſome of us, who are far from thinking themſelves void of religion, rather an evidence of a diſordered mind, than a well-grounded concern? Proſpects of temporal advantage elate us with the higheſt joy: do we experience equal ſatisfaction, though we ought to experience much greater, from the hopes of eternal bleſſedneſs? We are uſually very ambitious of making as good a figure as we poſſibly can in our preſent ſtate: what deſire do we ſhew of obtaining an honourable diſtinction in the next? Inſtead of this, we ſeem careful to exclude all reflexion on future exiſtence. When we ſpeak of the death of an acquaintance, when we put the ſuppoſition of our own, how commonly do we conſider it, as if nothing whatever were to follow after, and how ſeldom as an introduction to an infinitely more important life! Are we not indeed, ſome how or other,

* Matth. v. 8.

aſhamed to mention, as if it were improper, our faith in a judgement to come, as a reaſon againſt ſin, a motive to holineſs, a ſupport under affliction; or to acknowledge ourſelves influenced by it in any one article of conduct? Or, if we do admit another ſtate to ſuggeſt itſelf to us, perhaps we think more of hell with ſlaviſh terror, than of heaven with filial gratitude. Nay, even when we think of heaven, too commonly, if the truth were known, we have extremely faint wiſhes for it, or inclinations towards it. Yet, we can neither attain it, nor enjoy it, without loving it: and to love it indeed, we muſt love purity and benevolence, the company of good men, the worſhip of God: love to celebrate the praiſes of him that ſits on the throne, and the Lamb at his right hand: to meditate on the mercy of our heavenly Father, the condeſcenſion and the glories of his eternal Son, the gracious inſpirations of his Holy Spirit; our miſerable condition by nature, our bleſſed one through the goſpel of Chriſt, our proſpect of improving in pious and virtuous affection to all eternity. Now theſe, it may be feared, are the things of all others, that the thoughts many of us dwell on leaſt, and with the leaſt ſatisfaction: yet we call ourſelves chriſtians, and hope to be ſaved.

Nor muſt it be denied, that great imperfection in ſpiritual deſires may be conſiſtent with a ſtate of acceptance. But the farther ſuch deſires come ſhort of their due vigour, the weaker evidence we ſhall have of what we are moſt concerned to know: the nearer they advance towards it, the greater will be our comfort and help from above; for *to him that hath, ſhall be given**: and though, from natural cauſes, they may ſink, without danger, beneath what they once were, in ſenſible warmth, yet if their practical effects begin to leſſen, it ſhould be an alarming admonition, to *remember from whence we are fallen, and repent and do our firſt works*†; *to be watchful and ſtrengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die*‡.

The methods to reſtore, to preſerve and heighten our devout breathings towards *the Father of ſpirits*§, and the place of his abode, are theſe: that we appoint, and reſolutely ſecure to ourſelves frequent ſeaſons for examining and rectifying thoſe

* Matth. xiii. 12. † Rev. ii. 5. ‡ Ib. iii. 2. § Heb. xii. 9.

thoſe wrong apprehenſions of things which our own corrupt natures, the commerce of the world, and the ſuggeſtions of the wicked one are ſo apt to give us: that then we recollect the vanity, inſtability, and momentary duration, of every earthly good, the certainty of the unſeen ſtate, the eternal continuance of its joys and ſufferings, the inſeparable connexion of the one or the other with our preſent ſentiments and behaviour; the authority and holineſs of God, our own frailty, guilt, and weakneſs; the ſacrifice and reſurrection, the aſcenſion and interceſſion, of our bleſſed Mediator; and when we have filled our ſouls with theſe great truths, lay open the workings of them before the Lord of all, in ſuitable confeſſions, petitions, and praiſes: that, if we find not at firſt the pleaſure or the benefit we wiſh from ſuch exerciſes, we perſevere in them notwithſtanding; yet ſo as not to let them become either on the one hand empty forms, or on the other unneceſſary burthens; but employ them diſcreetly, as means to arrive at our end: that we aſſiſt our devotions and reflexions chiefly by the inimitable Spirit that breathes in the holy ſcriptures: but alſo by the uſe of other good books, and religious converſation, judiciouſly choſen: that we abſtain conſcientiouſly, as far as we can from every thing, of every ſort, which we find hath a tendency to corrupt or deaden our hearts; but particularly that we ſhelter our tender piety from the blaſts of ſcoffers with the utmoſt caution; indeed rather hide it from their knowledge, than expoſe it to their ridicule, yet never deny ourſelves to be what we are: that we conſtantly attend the public ſervice of God, not as a matter of cuſtom or entertainment, but with a faithful care to join fervently in his worſhip, to learn meekly from his word, and cheriſh by reflexion afterwards whatever good impreſſions we have felt at the time: that we ſtatedly come to the holy table with due preparation, vow peculiarly, in partaking of it, *to live by the faith of the Son of God**; and, as we profeſs uniting ourſelves to him by means of it, remember, that *he who is joined to the Lord is one ſpirit*†, Nor ſhould we conſider only the duty of being heavenly-minded, but alſo its advantages. We ſhall ceaſe to fear death in proportion as we ſet our affections on what is to follow it; and *have hope as an anchor of the ſoul, ſure and ſtedfaſt, and which entereth into that*

* Gal. ii. 20. † 1 Cor. vi. 17.

*that within the vail, whither the fore-runner is entered for us**. We ſhall ſcorn *to enjoy the pleaſures of ſin for a ſeaſon, if we have reſpect to the recompence of reward*; bear whatever ſufferings our chriſtian obedience may expoſe us to, *as ſeeing him, who is inviſible*†. We ſhall *take joyfully* the loſs of worldly *goods, knowing we have in heaven a better and an enduring ſubſtance*‡. When we are deprived of our deareſt friends, we ſhall *refrain our voice from weeping, and our eyes from tears, for our work ſhall be rewarded, and they ſhall come again from the land of the enemy*§. We ſhall *run with patience the race that is ſet before us, looking unto Jeſus, who endured the croſs, deſpiſing the ſhame, and is ſet down at the right hand of the throne of God*‖. The more we contemplate him, the more we feel we love him, the more we ſhall conſequently feel we are beloved by him. And when once *we have taſted, that the Lord is gracious*¶, we ſhall be *filled with all joy and peace in believing, and abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghoſt***, till we can ſay experimentally with the Pſalmiſt, *I am alway by thee: thou haſt holden me by my right hand. Thou ſhalt guide me with thy counſel, and after that receive me with glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I deſire in compariſon of thee. My fleſh and my heart faileth: but God is the ſtrength of my heart, and my portion for ever*††.

* Heb. vi. 19, 20. † Ib. xi. 25, 26, 27. ‡ Ib. x. 34. § Jer. xxxi. 16.
‖ Heb. xii. 1, 2. ¶ 1 Pet. ii. 3. ** Rom. xv. 13.
†† Pſ. lxxiii. 22,—25.

SER.

SERMON LXI.

The Nature of Religious Dispensation in the Old and New Testament.

1 John ii. 7, 8.

Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment, which ye had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word, which ye have heard from the beginning.

Again, a new commandment I write unto you: which thing is true in him and in you; because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.

THESE words contain a very useful piece of instruction, expressed in a manner somewhat obscure and enigmatical, on purpose to excite that attention, which they will soon reward by the discovery of their meaning. Probably they were designed to be more especially understood of the great precept, inculcated immediately after them, of universal good-will: an original duty of mankind, but strangely forgotten throughout the earth, till our Saviour taught it more clearly, and enforced it more strongly, than had ever been done before. Yet they are equally applicable to the whole of christianity: and it might very well be the apostle's meaning to extend them so far, and set forth in them a truth, wonderfully fitted to give both a just and engaging notion of the gospel: that its general purpose is to make men happy, by restoring amongst them the belief and practice of the primitive universal religion of rational beings: and that its peculiar doctrines were all introduced by the change of human circumstances, and are the same in substance with those, of which the Patriarchs and *Jews* received imperfect notices, and typical representations in antient time: that being thus, in respect of God's early promulgation

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of it, an *old commandment*; it was yet, with reſpect to the age in which our Saviour republiſhed it, a *new* one; as *darkneſs* had covered the word, which by his means was driven away; and the light of truth diſplayed again, with a brightneſs and reviving warmth, till then unknown. For chriſtianity added much evidence and diſtinctneſs to many important, and many comfortable articles of faith; and then building on them the correſponding obligations of duty, completed on the old foundations a ſtructure, only ſo far new as the ſtate of mankind required it ſhould be. This is, doubtleſs, an advantageous view of the chriſtian diſpenſation; repreſenting it as doing for us exactly what we needed to have done; and that it is likewiſe a juſt view of it, I ſhall endeavour to ſhew, by laying before you,

The nature of religion as it ſtood at firſt,

The condition of mankind afterwards: and

The fitneſs of the goſpel to that condition.

The duty of man, ſo far as it was diſcoverable to him by reaſon, whilſt he continued innocent, muſt conſiſt in love, honour, and obedience, to his Maker, Benefactor, and Sovereign Lord, joined with the care of copying the divine goodneſs in his behaviour to his fellow-creatures, and the divine holineſs in the rational government of himſelf. It is plain, that he could be obliged to no more, unleſs God was pleaſed, by revelation, to ſuperadd more; and as plain, that he was obliged to the whole of this. For to pretend reverence to our Father in heaven, yet to miſuſe his children and our brethren on earth; or to behave with affection, dutifulneſs and gratitude amongſt them, and yet ſhew none to him; and to profeſs both a righteous and godly life, yet to fail of the obligations of a ſober one, contradicting and debaſing reaſon by brutal exceſſes and irregularities, is evidently faulty and inconſiſtent. The ſame regard to truth and right, which requires any of theſe things, requires them all. So that neither piety and morals can be ſeparated from each other, nor any part of either from the reſt: but the whole hath one foundation; and is indeed one temper of mind, only exerted towards different objects. In this happy rectitude of heart and behaviour, conſiſts the image of God, the perfection of man, the original religion of all creatures, capable of religion, throughout the univerſe.

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Suppoſing, therefore, any creature fallen from this bleſſed ſtate, reſtoring him to it again muſt be the only ultimate end to which any uſeful endeavours of his own, or any gracious deſigns of heaven for his good, can be directed. Now, this is our caſe. We are fallen, by the fault of our firſt parents tranſgreſſing an eaſy revealed commandment, ſuperadded very juſtly to their natural ones, as a further trial of their obedience; we are fallen, I ſay, thus from uprightneſs of nature and immortality: and we feel convincing effects of that melancholy change. We are alſo fallen by our own fault, lower ſtill, from perſonal innocence into perſonal guilt; and from this condition we want to be recovered. But that we cannot be, nor deſire to be, till we are ſenſible of our miſery and danger, and ſorry for the ſins that have reduced us to ſo wretched a condition. Here then begins the neceſſity of repentance: a duty for which there was no room in the primitive ſtate of things; but in ours, the ground-work of all that we have to hope for. And this duty comprehends, not only that we condemn ourſelves of folly, for having acted contrary to our intereſts; and of baſeneſs, for having violated the dictates of our inward ſenſe of virtue; but of ill deſert in diſobeying God. The grief and ſhame attending repentance will vary in their expreſſion, according to the variety of mens natural conſtitutions. But diſapprobation of ſin, and care of amendment, are neceſſary proofs of its genuineneſs. And to theſe the offender is abſolutely bound, how ſmall ſoever his hope of pardon may be. For having done amiſs can, in no circumſtances, juſtify the neglect of doing better: and every increaſe of guilt muſt be expected to increaſe the puniſhment.

But ſtill, as our ſpirit and vigour in acting will be proportionable to the encouragement on which we act; without ſome good proſpect of forgiveneſs and acceptance, men would have ſo little heart to go through the difficulties of reformation, that ſcarce any regard to religion would be preſerved in the world. And therefore God hath enabled us, by the mere uſe of reaſon, to conclude it probable, that as goodneſs is always the object of his favour, ſo whenever we return to it really, though imperfectly, he will look on us anew, with tenderneſs and complacence. For *like as a father pitieth his children, ſo the Lord pitieth them that fear him: for he knoweth our frame,*

*he remembereth that we are but duſt**. But then, whether it be conſiſtent with the holineſs of his nature, and the honour of his government, that repentance ſhould obtain pardon in all caſes, or in which: and whether in any, without ſome admonitory and exemplary correction firſt; and how ſevere ſuch correction may be; though it nearly concerns us, who can ſay, unleſs knowledge be given him from above?

Another point, of greater importance to fallen and ſinful man, is this. Partly by the original depravation of our nature, partly by our actual tranſgreſſions, the ſtrength of the human mind is grievouſly weakened, and we find in ourſelves a ſad inability of doing, what yet we know we ought to do, and were made for, and cannot become happy without doing. Now what ſhall relieve us here? When indeed we contemplate God's continual providence and care, even over the meaneſt of his works, and reflect that the improvement of his rational creatures in piety and virtue muſt be the principal end of his creation; we cannot but hope, that he will condeſcend to aſſiſt us in it; inſpire us with good purpoſes, and direct and ſtrengthen us in the execution of them. But ſtill hope is not certainty: and the weaker our hope is, the fainter will our efforts be: and whether, after great and habitual ſins, we may promiſe ourſelves the aid of his ſpirit at all, though then we need it moſt, reaſon cannot judge on any certain grounds.

A third moſt material article, on which it throws a little light, but a light greatly overcaſt with clouds and doubts, is that of a future ſtate. Conſidering the immortal nature of man's ſoul, the evident capacity it hath for much higher degrees of knowledge and virtue, than it ever attains here: and the earneſt deſires of a future being, which the wiſeſt and beſt men feel beyond others: conſidering the many miſeries to which we are ſubject in this life, the few and low enjoyments of which we are capable, and the ſtrange diſproportion with which both are divided; while the good too frequently ſuffer every thing that is terrible for the ſake of their goodneſs: and the bad very commonly obtain the utmoſt proſperity by the means of their wickedneſs: men have never failed in any age of the world to entertain ſome expectation of a better and more equal ſtate hereafter. But how long or how ſhort its duration will be, how great or how ſmall its rewards, and what qualifications will

* Pſal. ciii. 13, 14.

will intitle us to any, and what ſhare of them; our unaſſiſted faculties only gueſs: and the ſubject appears in a very great meaſure to lie out of our reach.

But the divine mercy gave additional hopes to men from the very beginning, beyond what reaſon was able to furniſh; with uſeful, though general and obſcure, intimations of the means, by which theſe hopes were to be accompliſhed. Our firſt parents were told, that the *ſeed of the woman ſhould bruiſe the head*, and deſtroy the power, *of* that *ſerpent**, which had brought into the world ſin and death. Sacrifices were accepted, as early as the days of *Abel*. *Enoch*, for his piety, though undoubtedly not a faultleſs one, was tranſlated to a happier life. *Noah* was aſſured, that the *ſpirit of God ſtrove with men*†, to reform them. And theſe reviving truths, poſſibly with many more circumſtances and evidences of them, were certainly propagated amongſt all *Noah*'s children: of which there remain clear and numerous footſteps in the following ages.

But by degrees negligence and wickedneſs introduced ignorance and ſuperſtition: and theſe in their turn augmented negligence and wickedneſs: till the patriarchal doctrines were forgotten or perverted; the ſpiritual worſhip of God laid aſide for idolatry; and his nature and perfections ſo groſsly miſunderſtood, that it is no wonder if pardon of ſins, aſſiſtance in right conduct, and a recompence after death, were either not thought of, or expected on conditions abſurd, and even immoral. For the knowledge of the commonſt duties of life was in many caſes utterly loſt; and ſhocking crimes conſidered as perfectly lawful, nay exalted into acts of religion. Thus then did the nations of the earth, to ſpeak in the language of St. *Paul*, *walk in the vanity of their minds, having the underſtanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God*‡.

Suppoſe now any one to have made it his buſineſs, in this lamentable ſtate of things, to teach men their duty to God, their fellow-creatures, and themſelves; and to have given them only ſuch inſtructions in it, with ſuch hopes of acceptance and recompence, as the mere light of nature could afford; what a publiſher of good tidings, what a noble benefactor to

* Gen. iii. 15. † Ib. vi. 3. ‡ Eph. iv. 17, 18.

mankind, would ſuch a one have been! And had he further appointed a number of his followers to travel through every land, combat the reigning errors and follies, eſtabliſh the truth in their ſtead, and ſettle a ſucceſſion of men to ſupport it for ever; how highly would the inſtitution, and the author of it, have been honoured by the well-diſpoſed throughout the earth! But no perſon appeared, who had either abilities to execute, or greatneſs of mind to conceive, ſo vaſt and excellent a deſign. The founders, lawgivers, and rulers, of kingdoms and commonwealths, if they ſtudied the temporal welfare of thoſe under their care, for which they often provided very injudiciouſly, had little farther regard even to their morals, and to their religion ſcarce any at all: but patronized and ſet up whatever form of it, either the people were accuſtomed to obſerve; or their own fancy, or the example of their neighbours, happened to ſuggeſt. So that there was not, for many ages, in all the known countries of the Gentile world, a ſingle inſtance of rational public worſhip of the true God. Then for the philoſophers; moſt of them ſpent the chief of their time in ſpeculations, that had ſmall connexion with virtue and piety. And they who did turn their minds to examine into the obligations and the hopes of men, had very imperfect, very erroneous, notions of both; tolerated, and even applauded, great ſins; had ſcarce any notion at all, either of inward humility, or of repentance towards God; were very wavering, to ſay no worſe, in their belief of future rewards; and had yet leſs apprehenſions of future puniſhments. Beſides, they differed from one another in moſt material points, but all agreed in conforming to whatever falſe worſhip was eſtabliſhed: and, had they held more truth than they did, were ſo little regarded, in any thing right, by the generality of their fellow-citizens; that they confined their diſcourſes to a ſmall number of their private diſciples, and left the multitude to live and die like the beaſts that periſh. This undeniably was, and had long been, the caſe, when chriſtianity appeared. And though human reaſon might have taught men more than it did; yet they, whom it did not, were never the better for that poſſibility: nor was there any likelihood of its becoming fact.

Such was the condition of the Gentiles. That of the *Jews* in the mean time was very different, but became at length almoſt

moſt as bad. They had received, from their anceſtor *Abraham*, further notices of God's gracious intentions. They had received, from their legiſlator *Moſes*, a great bleſſing, an authorized written ſyſtem of true religion and moral virue; with additional precepts, to preſerve them from idolatry, ſeparate them from the nations that profeſſed it, and exhibit to them a more particular, but dark, repreſentation of good things to come, which would naturally engage their attention and expectation all along; and, being explained when God ſaw fit, would ſhow, that the purpoſe, which he executed in latter times, he had formed in the earlieſt. After this, they received from a long ſucceſſion of prophets, ampler and more ſpiritual inſtructions, fuller aſſurances of God's forgiveneſs and grace, clearer notifications of a future ſtate, and more circumſtantial accounts of an extraordinary perſon to ariſe from the family of *David*, by whom all the divine bleſſings were to be conveyed to all the world, on the condition of believing and obeying him.

Theſe undoubtedly were great advantages. Yet for a long time, notwithſtanding them all, they were continually aſſociating idols with the true God, and even the vileſt parts of heathen worſhip with his. And when they came to profeſs a ſtricter adherence to their own religion, they grievouſly perverted the moſt eſſential articles of it. They worked themſelves into a hatred of other nations, againſt whom they were indeed commanded to be on their guard, but ſtill to love them. They promiſed themſelves a temporal deliverer, to eſtabliſh for their benefit an univerſal kingdom of this world, inſtead of one to free them from ſin and death. They neglected the weightier, the moral parts of their law; and grew ſo minutely and abſurdly obſervant of the ceremonial, that at length they imagined, their whole duty to God conſiſted in outward forms; by a ſcrupulous practice of which they conceited themſelves to merit every thing from him, without any one good quality within. ●

When therefore the wiſdom of the wiſeſt nations had proved fooliſhneſs, and the piety of the beſt inſtructed ſadly degenerated into ſuperſtition, our heavenly Father mercifully and ſeaſonably ſent forth his Son, to renew *the old commandment which was in the beginning*, to perfect thoſe additions to

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it which the alteration of human circumſtances had required, and perpetuate the knowledge of the whole to the end of time.

That the ultimate deſign of chriſtianity is re-eſtabliſhing the love of God, the love of men, the love of virtue, is obviouſly plain from the whole New Teſtament: particularly, from our Saviour's ſermon on the mount; from his anſwer to the queſtion, *which is the great commandment in the law**: from St. *James's* declaration, what is *pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father*†: from St. *Paul*'s diſcourſe to the *Athenians*: from his obſervation, that *love is the end of the commandment*‡: from his explicit aſſertion, that the *grace of God appeared* for this purpoſe, to *teach all men, that, denying ungodlineſs and worldly luſts, they ſhould live ſoberly, righteouſly, and godly, in this preſent world, looking for the glorious hope*§ of a better. And the re-eſtabliſhment, which the goſpel hath made in this reſpect, is perfect. It requires ſuch love of God, as will incline us effectually to imitate, as well as honour him; ſuch love of men, as extends to the whole world, and ſeeks both the temporal and the ſpiritual good of all; ſuch love of virtue, as is free from oſtentation, from auſterity, from ſelf-opinion. It lays us under a neceſſity of remembering, that we are frail, that we are ſinners; and therefore moſt firmly bound to humility in our own hearts, mildneſs towards others, penitence in the ſight of God. To thoſe who are in any degree thus diſpoſed, it not only repeats the obſcurer, yet inſtructive and comfortable, intimations, of pardon, grace, and reward; which the patriarchal ages enjoyed, *as a light ſhining faintly in a dark place*‖; and which after-times loſt, and wandered on in the thickeſt night: but it viſits men like *the day-ſpring from on high*, cloſe followed by the ſun of righteouſneſs beaming forth to cheer our hearts, and *guide our feet into the way of peace*¶. Inſtead of the ſhadows and figures of the *Moſaic* law, which veiled, and, in a great meaſure, concealed, what they exhibited; it preſents us with the undiſguiſed truth and very ſubſtance: ſets before our eyes that great atonement to the juſtice of heaven, which other victims were appointed to preſignify;

* Matth. xxii. 36.
† James i. 27.
‡ 1 Tim. i. 5.
§ Tit. ii. 11, 12, 13.
‖ 2 Pet. i. 19.
¶ Luke i. 78, 79.

ſignify; and opens the whole treaſure of divine bounty; free forgiveneſs, kind aſſiſtance, eternal happineſs, to the worſt of ſinners, on the equitable, the advantageous terms of ingenuous ſorrow, thankful faith, and univerſal, though ſtill imperfect, obedience. *Come every one that thirſteth, come to the waters* of life, and *buy without money and without price**. Inſtead of a heavy yoke of ceremonial reſtraints, and rigorous obſervances unexplained, neceſſary for the immature and injudicious age of the *Jewiſh* diſpenſation; God hath conſidered chriſtians as grown up to a manly capacity of rational ſervice, and fuller knowledge of his counſels. He hath therefore communicated to us a much greater number of doctrinal truths, all fitted to inſtruct our worſhip, and inflame our gratitude: but hath reduced our ritual performances to two: both of them clear and important in their meaning; eaſy and affecting in their uſe, and fully guarded againſt being eſteemed beyond their uſe: firſt, baptiſm, which moſt aptly ſignifies our engagements to preſerve ourſelves from the defilement of ſin, and God's promiſe to look on us as free from the guilt of it; then the holy Euchariſt; which, with equal propriety, expreſſes our Saviour's giving his body to be broken, and his blood to be ſhed, for the ſake of man; and our being nouriſhed, and ſtrengthened, and united, to him for ever, by imbibing and digeſting his doctrine, and receiving into our ſouls, by faith, the beneficial influences of his death.

Thus then the *new commandment*, delivered by our bleſſed Lord, is an authentic republication, both of the primitive religion of man before the fall, and of the additional inſtructions given him after it; with ſuch improvements of theſe laſt, as make up, together with the former, a complete inſtitution of piety, fitted to anſwer all our neceſſities to the world's end. To prevent or detect any corruptions or miſtakes in ſo important a ſyſtem of doctrine, the bleſſed Author of it hath provided, that we ſhould have the very words, in which he delivered it, recorded in the goſpels; and his true meaning confirmed, and further explained, in the writings of his immediate diſciples: which ineſtimable treaſure providence hath watched over through every age: and, by its aſſiſtance, the

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* Iſa. lv. 1.

old commandment hath once in theſe latter days been reſcued from dangerous perverſions, and happily reſtored to its original purity.

But beſides, he hath made yet another proviſion for ſecuring, not only the genuine belief, but the faithful practice of it. As man is a ſocial creature, and capable of receiving at leaſt as much benefit from uniting in religion, as in other things: ſo he hath formed his followers into a ſpiritual ſociety, or church; to celebrate the worſhip of God more ſolemnly, and bear a public teſtimony to his truths; to exhort, and *provoke one another to love and good works**; to *reſtore in the ſpirit of meekneſs them that are overtaken in faults*†, but *put away from among ſt them the* groſsly and obſtinately *wicked*‡; that, if poſſible, the reverence of ſo awful a cenſure may bring them to recollect themſelves and repent; or, ſuppoſing it fails, that yet the innocence of the reſt, and the honour of the chriſtian name, may be preſerved. And that all this may be performed in a due manner, he hath inſtituted a regular ſubordination and ſucceſſion of *paſtors and teachers, for the perfecting of the ſaints, for the edifying of the body of Chriſt* §. An appointment evidently ſuitable, both to the nature of a being, which ſo greatly wants inſtruction and admonition, as man; and to the nature of a religion, that will ſo very well bear to be ſhewn in a full light. However defectively, therefore, or wrongly, this inſtitution may be adminiſtered through our faults; or how much ſoever it may be deſpiſed, or obſtructed, through yours; yet, in itſelf, it is viſibly of excellent uſe; and, which is remarkable, peculiar to the religion delivered in ſcripture. For, in the Gentile world, through many centuries, we have no one inſtance of any public teaching, much leſs any moral diſcipline, attending their worſhip. And indeed when *Julian* attempted to ſet up preachers of heatheniſm, in oppoſition to thoſe of chriſtianity, it was immediately foretold him, and the event verified the prediction, that what had proved ſo effectual to eſtabliſh truth, would only ſerve to expoſe and ruin error.

Such then being the nature of our holy religion, and ſuch the methods taken to preſerve it from corruption, and make it

* Heb. x. 24, 25. † Gal. vi. 1.
‡ 1 Cor. v. 13. § Eph. iv. 11, 12.

it a perpetual inſtrument of preſent and eternal happineſs to mankind; whoever ſincerely honours God, loves his fellow-creatures, or wiſhes well to his own ſoul, muſt ſee and feel himſelf deeply concerned to embrace and reſpect the goſpel of *Chriſt*; which God cannot have revealed for ſuch noble purpoſes, and left any one at liberty to ſlight a ſingle part of it. But then we muſt remember, that neither profeſſing nor admiring it, will ſerve for any thing but our condemnation; unleſs we *receive it* unto *an honeſt and good heart**, and bring forth the fruits of it in pious and virtuous lives. *Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doth righteouſneſs, is righteous: he that committeth ſin, is of the devil. For this purpoſe the Son of God was manifeſted, that he might deſtroy the works of the devil* †; *and hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments* ‡.

* Mark iv. 20. Luke viii. 15. † 1 John iii. 7, 8. ‡ 1 John ii. 3.

SERMON LXII.

The Tendency of the Spirit of the Gospel, and its Miserable Perversion by Human Depravity.

MATTH. x. 34.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword.

THAT these words of our blessed Saviour express, not the design of his appearing in the world, but the effect it would have very contrary to his design, through the wickedness of men, both his life and doctrine sufficiently shew: and, indeed, all sorts of men have acknowledged. For though too many Christians have acted as if they understood him to desire what he only foretels, and thought it their duty to make his words good: yet none of them, I think, have ever professed to understand him so. And infidels themselves have done him the justice of allowing, that he meant to establish good-will and virtue among men. But then his religion, they say, hath so miserably failed of answering his purpose, hath produced such dreadful evils, and been of so exceeding small benefit, that they cannot imagine a wise and good being, as God is, would ever take such very extraordinary methods as the gospel asserts, to introduce and establish it. And though few, it may be hoped, will think it reasonable to carry the matter thus far: yet many may be tempted by such confident affirmations, if not to doubt of the truth of christianity, yet to have less delight in it, less thankfulness and zeal for it, than they would otherwise have.

We shall do well, therefore, to enquire, both how far the facts alledged in this objection are true, and whether the conclusion drawn from them is just.

That considerable evils have taken their rise from our Saviour's doctrine, must be owned. He himself, we see, declares they

they would: and he had reaſon to declare it in terms as ſtrong, as the truth would warrant. For as the *Jews* expected nothing but peace and proſperity, for themſelves at leaſt, under their *Meſſiah*, it was both honourable and prudent to give them fair warning of what was to happen, that they might not firſt be elevated with falſe hopes, and heated into preſumptuous behaviour, and then complain they had been deceived and miſled. Beſides, as he undoubtedly thought the leaſt degree of evil a great deal too much, he could not ſpeak ſlightly of that which he foreſaw. But ſtill he could never deſign to ſay, that it would over-balance or go near to equal the good: for thus he might have diſcredited his own miſſion, and contradicted the whole tenour of his own diſcourſes.

The allegations, therefore, of the argument before us cannot be proved from this text, nor, indeed, from any other. But the whole proof muſt be drawn from the natural tendency of chriſtianity, and the experience of its effects. Now it cannot, conſiſtently with common modeſty, be denied, that the tendency of chriſtianity to the welfare of mankind is very powerful. Juſtice and mercy, obedience to ſuperiors, condeſcenſion to inferiors, mutual tenderneſs and mutual uſefulneſs, are the main precepts that every where occur in it: to theſe peculiarly the reward of everlaſting happineſs is annexed; and nothing contrary to them is ever taught throughout the ſcripture. It is very true, pleas have been made from it in ſupport of tyranny and cruelty; but they are ſo abſolutely groundleſs, that unbelievers themſelves have vindicated our religion in this reſpect, by charging it on thoſe whom they apprehend to claim exorbitant powers, that they aſſumed what their own ſacred books did not give them the leaſt colour for.

Nor indeed do I remember any accuſation againſt the goſpel, as hurtful in its nature, at all worth notice, excepting that of the great ſtreſs it is ſaid to lay on right belief: from whence, we are told, all who imagine each other to believe amiſs have been prompted to reciprocal hatred and perſecution; whereas, the heathens had no articles of faith, and therefore lived in peace *. But indeed every profeſſion, both of religion and irreligion, muſt have ſome belief to ground itſelf upon: elſe it

* See Letter to the Miniſter of *Moffat*, p. 7, and the Anſwer to it.

will be a profeſſion of nothing. Deiſts, and even Atheiſts, have their creed; conſiſting, as they would find upon inquiry, of much ſtranger doctrines than ours doth: which alſo they believe to be of vaſt importance, otherwiſe they would be ſelf-condemned for propagating it. Nay, if we may judge of what many of them would do, by the ſpirit they manifeſt in what they ſay; as they inveigh againſt chriſtianity now both with bitterneſs and unfairneſs, they would employ againſt it, if they had power, violence as well as fraud *. Then, as for the heathens, whoſe mildneſs in theſe matters is ſo extolled; both *Jews* and *Chriſtians* had moſt dreadful experience of their want of it. Nor were they by any means totally guiltleſs of religious quarrels among themſelves. Nor hath the goſpel given the leaſt encouragement to ſuch quarrels by the faith it requires. So much faith it muſt require, as may be a foundation for the duties it enjoins. But all unneceſſary ſpeculations it condemns in the fulleſt and ſtrongeſt terms. Be mens faith ever ſo right, it tells them plainly they ſhall never be rewarded, without every part of a good life: and be their faith ever ſo wrong, it neither permits unkind uſage of them in this world nor harſh judgement with reſpect to another. There are, indeed, awful denunciations in the bible, againſt ſuch as corrupt the goſpel, *turn the grace of God into laſciviouſneſs* †, or abuſe it to patronize any kind of immorality. But nothing ſevere is ever ſaid of well-meaning perſons that miſtake; nor any thing more ſevere of bad men that err in opinion, than of bad men that do not. Nor can there be ſtricter injunctions againſt any thing, or enforced with better arguments, than thoſe of *Chriſt* and his apoſtles againſt all ſorts of perſecution. So that had they eſtabliſhed ever ſo many articles of faith, and laid ever ſo much weight upon them, yet as they have certainly laid equal weight at leaſt on brotherly love, mutual forbearance, and univerſal charity: they can never have authoriſed doing any harm in the world. And the religion they taught is confeſſedly fitted to do all the good in it, which the pureſt precepts, and the ſtrongeſt inducements to practiſe them, the moſt regular care to inſtruct men, and the moſt friendly diſcipline to watch over them, are capable of.

Yet

* See *Leland* againſt *Tindal*, Vol. I. p. 302—312.

† Jude 4.

Yet some, notwithstanding, will insist, that in fact it hath done harm: and against fact there is no arguing. But, in the nature of things, nothing can do what it hath no manner of tendency to do. Christianity therefore may have been the pretence, may have been the occasion, of evil; but the cause it cannot. However, let us enquire, what the proof is of its having any way occasioned near so much harm, as it hath directly produced good. We readily confess, a long catalogue may with ease be given of the sins and sufferings that have followed its appearance and establishment. In the first place, its professors underwent grievous persecutions from the rest of mankind. But evidently this is no more to be charged upon christianity, than the injuries which the wicked have often done to the good, on account of their goodness, are to be charged on moral virtue. In the next place, the *Jews*, having offended God by their inhuman treatment of the gospel, were permitted, by his just providence, to turn the same bitter spirit against each other, and against the *Romans*, and so to bring on themselves utter destruction. But here also christianity is perfectly clear, unless it be an innocent man's fault, that a criminal is punished for having robbed or murdered him. And these things it probably was that our Saviour had chiefly in view, when he spoke in the text of *a sword* to be *sent on the earth*; or, as perhaps, it should be translated, *on the land*, the country of *Judea*.

But, we must acknowledge farther, discord and divisions prevailed very soon among christians also, and produced lamentable effects: till they came at length to exercise barbarities one towards another, equal to any they had suffered from infidels. But then it ought to be allowed us in return, that though unjust spiritual censures began even in the second century, and the low degrees of temporal persecution, such as banishment and confiscation, in the fourth, very soon after they had power: yet the utmost extremities were introduced much later, nor did they receive the formal sanction of the supreme authority, till many ages after. I believe twelve hundred years had passed, before any law was made in any christian state for putting men to death on account of erroneous faith. Since that time, indeed, most shocking tragedies have been acted by a wicked zeal for religion. But then many, that have seemed to proceed from that cause, were but the real truth known, would in all like-

likelihood be found, and indeed often have been found, to proceed from quite other motives. Intereſts and reſentments have been covered perpetually with a maſk of piety. Zealots have often been only the inſtruments of parties, while they ſeemed to be their directors; and the miſchief, done in the name of God, would have been as certainly done without it under ſome other pretence, if that had not offered itſelf. Religion is a ſpecious plea; and therefore was uſed whenever it could: but any plea will ſerve for what men are bent to do. And if the miſchiefs that have been diſguiſed under a form of godlineſs, could not in ſome caſes have been ſo eaſily or effectually accompliſhed elſe: yet the whole of them ought not to be attributed even to the pretence of piety; but only ſo much as would not have happened, had not that been uſed. Religious animoſities, religious wars, have been frequent and dreadful. But can we imagine, that if theſe had been avoided, no others would have ariſen, during all the time that they have filled? Such a notion would argue ſtrange ignorance of human nature. So that in ages when the world hath appeared to ſuffer very much from the abuſes of religion, it may indeed have ſuffered very little from them. And of what it hath ſuffered, one great part may have proceeded, not from the bigotry of believers, but the artifices of ſuch as were inwardly unbelievers.

But beſides the evil of diſcord, chriſtianity hath been accuſed of obſtructing knowledge, and promoting ignorance in the world *. But in what condition was the world before chriſtianity? Did not the groſſeſt ignorance, about matters of the higheſt importance to men, prevail almoſt every where, even in the politeſt and beſt inſtructed nations? And if the ſucceeding times were not learned, what elſe could be expected; when the *Roman* empire debaſed and ſunk under tyranny and luxury, before it received the goſpel, was ſoon after diſſolved by that inundation of barbarians that overſpread *Europe* with war and deſolation? By theſe heathens it was that arts and ſciences were brought ſo low. What remained of learning, remained among chriſtians: and as they became chriſtians, they ſhared in it. Little was left indeed. But had it not been for the profeſſors, and particularly the teachers of this religion, to which

* That chriſtianity hath not been hurt by the increaſe of knowledge, ſee Warburton, Vol. II. Serm. xv.

which ſome would impute all the darkneſs of the middle ages, every monument of ancient days muſt probably have been loſt *. Chriſtians they were too, and principally clergymen, that have reſtored and improved learning ſince; and the chriſtian world is at this day the ſeat of it. Nor will the unbelievers amongſt us, I am perſuaded, pretend that, what they have contributed to make it ſo, is at all material in compariſon, or preſume to mention the names of their few and arrogant leaders in competition with the multitudes of truly great men, who have adorned the faith of *Chriſt* by their diſtinguiſhed excellence in every branch of philoſophy and literature. Indeed learning is of ſuch eminent ſervice, both to the underſtanding and the proof of our religion, that we muſt of neceſſity ſupport it. And accordingly, more are bred up to learning with a view of being dedicated to the miniſtry of the goſpel, than with any other whatever. Few of them, in proportion, we own, make great improvements: but few in any profeſſion do. And preſerving thus, though it be but a moderate degree of knowledge, amongſt men, cannot fail to be exceedingly uſeful; eſpecially of that knowledge which immediately relates to their moral conduct. But were infidelity once to prevail, the chief inducements to all applications of this ſort would ceaſe: ſcarce any one would take the pains to learn, what it would be no one's peculiar duty to teach; worldly purſuits and ſenſual indulgences, having little to check them, would almoſt wholly engroſs the attention of mankind; and produce not only a neglect, but a contempt, of more liberal ſtudies; as I fear we have begun to experience already.

But we ſhall be told, that how little harm, or how much ſervice ſoever, chriſtianity may have done to learning; it hath contributed nothing to the virtue or happineſs of mankind, and therefore cannot be a religion worthy of God. Now, on the contrary, we apprehend, it hath contributed to both theſe very greatly: and it ſeems the extremity of unreaſonableneſs to ſay, that, in ſpite of all its precepts, promiſes and threatenings, it can make multitudes bad, and yet by the force of them all can make no one good. There is viſibly no poſſibility that either better rules of life ſhould be given, or more intereſting motives

* The religious orders eſtabliſhed in the 11th century revived learning in the 12th. See *Journ. des Sc.* July, 1744. p. 317.

motives to obſerve them, than the goſpel hath given. It muſt therefore reform thoſe, whom any doctrine can: and the only objection againſt it on this head muſt be, that it doth not reform thoſe whom no doctrine can.

Still it will be ſaid; look into the hiſtory of chriſtian nations, into that of the chriſtian clergy in particular; and what will you find, but the ſame wrong inclinations and wrong behaviour, in at leaſt the ſame degree as amongſt other men? And it muſt be owned, the profeſſors of the goſpel in general, but the miniſters of it above all, (becauſe, though on the whole we have by no means been worſe, yet we ought to have been far better than the reſt) have much cauſe to be humble before God and the world for the diſhonour we have done by our negligence, our ſenſuality, our haughtineſs, our ambition, our covetouſneſs, our unfairneſs, our bitterneſs, to the worthy and holy name whereby we are called. But as to the degree of theſe faults, it ſhould be obſerved, that if ſins and follies make the chief figure in chriſtian hiſtories, ſo they do and muſt in all hiſtories. Virtuous and quiet times, be they ever ſo long, virtuous and quiet men, be they ever ſo many, furniſh uſually but ſlender materials for a narration, and fill up but a ſmall ſpace in it; whereas great notice is taken of the bad things that are done in the world, partly from a natural diſlike of wickedneſs, partly from perſonal hatred to ſome of thoſe who commit it, and partly alſo from the pleaſure men have in framing compariſons advantageous to themſelves. But eſpecially the failings of ſuch as lie under peculiar obligations of being pious and exemplary, will always be ſeen in the very ſtrongeſt light, and blame thrown upon them beyond all proportion, when they act amiſs. But when men act well, and things go on right, very little is ſaid. The good do not proclaim their own goodneſs: and the world is ſeldom very inquiſitive about it; hath other matters to mind; thinks at the moſt they do but their duty, and is much apter to ſeek for, and imagine faults, than to own and remember virtues.

In the primitive times, when few were tempted to profeſs the faith of *Chriſt* but ſuch as embraced it in earneſt, and his diſciples were eaſily diſtinguiſhed from the reſt of mankind, the fruits of the goſpel bore a moſt convincing teſtimony in its favour. But when once the profeſſion grew general, and pro-table: when real and pretended chriſtians were mixed toge-r, and the virtues hid amongſt the immoral, no wonder if

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then the benefit was less remarkable. The whole promiscuous collection going all under one name, and many of them seeming but little the better for their faith, both partial and careless observers have hastily concluded that few or none are the better at all. And yet, there are great numbers on the whole, much greater than either the profane are ready to think, or even the pious have commonly the means of knowing, whose hearts and lives their belief hath wonderfully amended: some of good dispositions raised by it to eminent goodness: others of bad dispositions excited to resist them effectually. And how much the influence of religious principles and religious persons, whom our Saviour calls the *salt of the earth**, may contribute to preserve even the bad part of mankind from utter corruption and dissolution, is not perhaps often sufficiently considered.

But were it true, though it neither is nor can be, that the virtuous would be equally virtuous without the precepts, without the promises, without the grace of the gospel: yet there is no pretence, that they would be equally happy too. For the christian doctrine is adapted throughout in the highest degree to support them under the difficulties of duty, and the afflictions of life, by such assurances, as reason unassisted can never give, that God will pardon, strengthen, and reward them, both here and to eternity. Possibly to some this may seem at present a small matter. But there will come a time, may it come before it be too late! when they will be sensible, that these are the most important of all things.

It must not be objected, that believers in the gospel are often full of doubts and terrors. For believers in natural religion alone have infinitely more cause for them, as both their rule and their hopes are infinitely more obscure. Nor must it be argued, that if christianity adds to the happiness of the virtuous here, it adds also to the uneasiness of the vicious: for they ought to be uneasy for the world's sake and their own. It may force them to grow better; if not, it may restrain them from growing worse: at least, sooner or later, it may bring them back, in part, if not wholly; and thus prevent an unknown quantity of evils, which else they would suffer, and make those around them suffer. So that, indeed,

* Matth. v. 13.

one perſon, where the goſpel is at all underſtood, can well fail to be in ſome reſpect a gainer by it. And be its good influence ever ſo ſmall on each ſingly, yet the ſum total muſt be very large. It is ſoon ſaid in an angry mood, that religion doth no good; for the world cannot be worſe than it is. But conſider a little what the face of things would be, were the forming hand of chriſtian education to ceaſe from its work, and the continual warnings of chriſtian inſtruction to be laid aſide. Nothing could be ſubſtituted comparable to them: Nothing would be ſubſtituted at all. Attempts for it, if they were made, which probably they might not be in haſte, would be diſunited and inconſiſtent, diſregarded and ſucceſsleſs: all perſons would be left in a great meaſure, and the lower and larger part intirely, to the guidance of appetites and paſſions grown up wild, with a very poor mixture of a reaſon uninformed, and more likely to be ſubſervient and do miſchief, than govern and do good.

Nor have they alone, who profeſs chriſtianity, been made wiſer and better by it, but others alſo. The chief part of what is valuable in the *Mahometan* religion, which hath ſpread exceedingly wide, is probably derived from the Old and New Teſtament. And certainly the unbelievers amongſt ourſelves, who would fain repreſent revelation as uſeleſs, have, notwithſtanding, borrrowed from it thoſe rational notions of piety and virtue, which they pretend to be the natural growth of their own underſtandings. For few or none of the moſt learned of their heathen predeceſſors had them: but ſcarce the moſt ignorant of their chriſtian contemporaries are without them.

Nor ſhould we conſider only what good the goſpel hath done in other reſpects, but how much ſuperſtition particularly it hath extinguiſhed or prevented. The ſuperſtitions it hath occaſioned, we are continually told of: but many ſeem to have forgot thoſe it found in the world; the moſt abſurd and abject, the moſt expenſive and troubleſome, the moſt immoral and barbarous, that could be. And none were more cruel, or upheld by more dreadful church-tyranny, than thoſe of the *Druids*, in this nation. Now who can ſay, how long any of theſe might have continued; who can ſay, how much worſe they might have become, and have been at this day, if chriſtianity had not rooted them out? The very groſſeſt corruptions

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of it, afterwards, were not quite ſo bad as thoſe preceeding enormities. Beſides, in many countries, but in none more completely than our own, the reformation of it hath driven out thoſe abuſes, which the perverſion of it brought in: and it continually bears teſtimony againſt them, wherever the ſcripture is freely read. Superſtition is by no means an effect of religion, but a natural weakneſs in the human mind, to which it may be greatly ſubject even without religion. The goſpel was intended to deſtroy it: the clergy are intended for a ſtanding guard againſt it: and though too much of it ſtill prevails among chriſtians, yet very much more prevails in all the reſt of the world.

Taking therefore into our view the whole benefit of the ſcripture-revelation, both what it hath effected, and what it hath hindred: had it been the pretence or the occaſion for all the harm that is alledged, it may yet have been the direct cauſe of unſpeakably more good: and nothing can be unfairer, than attending only to one ſide of the account, inſtead of both. Indeed to ſtate both exactly, or make any balance approaching towards accuracy, is utterly impoſſible, where ſo vaſt a number of things and circumſtances, through ſo large a part of the world and ſo long a ſucceſſion of ages, muſt come in before a judgement can be formed. Every one may aſſert as boldly as he will to the diſadvantage of chriſtianity. But to prove the aſſertion from fact muſt be inſuperably difficult. And when facts cannot be ſufficiently aſcertained and compared, the preſumption will always be a very juſt and ſtrong one, that every thing hath produced thoſe effects chiefly, which its natural tendency fits it to produce. Now the good tendency of chriſtianity no candid and conſiderate reaſoner will ever diſpute.

But one objection farther hath been raiſed, that how difficult ſoever it may be to judge of a ſeries of paſt times, yet the conſequences of introducing the goſpel into heathen nations in our own times may be judged of: and we have imparted it to none, but we have made them worſe than we found them. Now ſuppoſing this dreadful imputation true, is it by teaching them our religion that we have corrupted them, or by teaching them ſins abſolutely inconſiſtent with our religion? Had they learned our chriſtianity without our debauchery, which is ſurely no part of it, their condition had been infinitely bet-

ter than it was before: and had they learned our debauchery without our chriſtianity, it had been ſtill worſe than it is now.

Nor doth this obſervation hold with reſpect to them only, but ourſelves too. We compare the preſent chriſtian times, in which numberleſs incentives to luxury and all manner of wickedneſs abound, with the ancient heathen ones, when the poverty and ſimplicity of their manner of life ſecured them from adding artificial, to their natural, vices: and in whatever we find or imagine ourſelves worſe than them, we aſcribe it to our religion. Whereas the true method of comparing is, to take a luxurious heathen nation; *Rome* under its emperors for inſtance; and a luxurious chriſtian one; and then ſee where crimes will appear to be moſt general, and carried fartheſt: only making due allowance for one thing, that the ſins and follies we are offended at in our own age, will look greater, becauſe they are preſent; and yet the virtues of thoſe we live amongſt will ſeem leſs, becauſe love to ourſelves will tempt us to depreciate thoſe, with whom we ſhall be moſt compared.

But ſuppoſing it ever ſo queſtionable, what good, or ever ſo clear what harm, hath proceeded from chriſtianity; how are we juſtified in doubting on that account, whether its origin be from God? Think only of how little benefit reaſon hath been to a great part of mankind: how much uneaſineſs it hath cauſed, by enabling them to reflect on their own diſadvantages, dangers, and ſufferings; how much miſchief it hath brought to paſs, by qualifying them to contrive and execute ill deſigns againſt each other; how much wiſer and better many brutes are, than many men: yet doth not reaſon proceed from God? Again, what innumerable evils in all ages and countries, have civil governors been the authors of? The abuſes of chriſtianity cannot have produced ſo much evil, as the abuſes of temporal power, becauſe they have not extended near ſo far. Yet is not ſociety and civil government from God! Indeed if nothing could be from him, but what in the event is an advantage to us; we muſt deny that the very being of many perſons is derived from him: for too many doubtleſs had better never have been. The good, which he intends abſolutely and unconditionally, nothing can hinder: but where he intends only to afford men the means of being happy

happy if they will, he muſt leave it in their choice to be otherwiſe: and what he doth for them, is not the leſs worthy of him, becauſe they are ſo unworthy, as to diſpiſe or turn it againſt themſelves. For never ſure was it made an argument againſt the value of a medicine, that they who neglect to take it, or who mix poiſon with it, are not the better for it. Whoever will give religion leave to do him good, will always be an evidence of its uſefulneſs. And it is extremely hard, to have thoſe alledge againſt us that there are but few ſuch, who are continually endeavouring that there may be none; and impute that wickedneſs of the world to the want of efficacy in chriſtianity, which is ſo very much owing to their own profane diſcourſe and licentious examples.

But farther: the goſpel-ſcheme is not completed yet; and the good it hath not done, it may do ſtill. It hath ſubſiſted indeed a number of years, that ſeems a large one, and ſufficient to ſhew whatever is to be expected from it. But large and ſmall are comparative terms: and what proportion its duration hitherto may bear to that which it hath to come, or how differently the power of God may be exerted in its favour hereafter from what it is now, we none of us know. But this we know certainly, that the original books in which it is contained, publiſhed at its firſt appearance, foretold both its paſt and preſent corruptions, and its future purity and univerſal happy fruits. The former of theſe predictions, that chriſtianity ſhould be made an inſtrument of tyranny and ſuperſtition, bloodſhed and diſſoluteneſs, was a very amazing one: a thing which neither any ſagacity could have foreſeen, nor any enthuſiaſt have believed; nor any impoſtor would have declared, if he had believed it. And therefore the fact, joined with the prophecy of it, far from an objection, is a proof of our religion; and ſhews us to be in the midſt of an event; the melancholy part of which having been ſo remarkably ſignified to us before-hand, we ought by no means to judge of what will follow as we ſhould in a common caſe; but firmly believe, that as *the myſtery of iniquity** hath been revealed, *the myſtery of God*† ſhall be accompliſhed likewiſe, and truth and virtue reign on this earth.

But then let us remember, that full enough hath been done to

* 2 Theſſ. ii. 7. † Rev. x. 7.

to verify the firſt ſet of predictions; and it is high time we ſhould begin to make good the latter. That Chriſt hath *ſent a ſword on earth*, no one doubts: let it now be our care to ſhew him in a more amiable light, as the *Prince of peace*. We have ſufficiently made the *goſpel miniſter to ſin*: let us at laſt bring forth *fruit by it unto holineſs*. Then we ſhall bear in our own breaſts the ſureſt, the happieſt, the only beneficial proof of its efficacy; and *have our converſation* ſuch amongſt unbelievers, that *whereas they* now *ſpeak againſt us as evil-doers*, and againſt our religion itſelf for our ſakes, *they may by our good works, which they ſhall behold, glorify God**: thus bringing forward that bleſſed time, when *the wolf ſhall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid; when they ſhall not hurt nor deſtroy in all his holy mountain: for the earth ſhall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the ſea*†.

Yet even this joyful ſcene will be only a faint ſhadow of that eternal ſtate of bliſs, to which is reſerved the complete vindication of the benefits of chriſtianity: and in which, however the preſent world were to go on, they muſt appear with irreſiſtible evidence, when the *righteous ſhall ſhine forth as the Sun in the kingdom of their Father*‡, *when God ſhall wipe away all the tears from their eyes, and there ſhall be no more death, neither ſorrow nor crying, neither ſhall there be any more pain*§.

* 2 Pet. ii. 12.
† Iſaiah xl. 6, 9.
‡ Matth. xiii. 43.
§ Rev. xxi. 4.

SER-

SERMON LXIII.

The Danger and Misery of Loose Morals, and of Licentious Associates.

Eph. v. 11.

And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkneſs: but rather reprove them.

If the practice of their duty were general amongſt men, it would appear to all of us as we come forward into life, notwithſtanding our preſent proneneſs to ſinful indulgences, extremely natural and eaſy. For as its reaſonableneſs always recommends it to our underſtandings, and its amiableneſs to our affections, when unbiaſſed: ſo, in theſe circumſtances, the public example of goodneſs would engage our imitation, the univerſal eſteem of it excite our ambition, and its beneficial conſequences plainly ſhew it to be our true preſent intereſt. Allurements to unlawful pleaſures would then be comparatively few; provocations to mutual injuries none: conſciouſneſs of right behaviour would make men pleaſed with themſelves; reciprocal acts of juſtice and kindneſs would make them happy in each other; and experience, that there being was a bleſſing to them, would produce in their ſouls affectionate ſentiments of reverential gratitude to the bountiful Author of it. Such we ſhould have found the world, if ſin had not entered into it: and ſuch we might ſtill in a good meaſure bring it to be, if we would; if moſt of us did not, beſides filling our own lives with guilt and miſery, contribute, by a variety of wrong behaviour, to render our fellow-creatures alſo wicked and wretched. This we all ſee and feel to be the real ſtate of things: but how do we act upon it? We complain grievouſly of each other, for the faults which we each of us go on to commit;

commit: we complain even of providence, becauſe the world is—only what we have made it; and alledge the miſconduct of our neighbours for a defence of our own, inſtead of trying to mend ourſelves or them: whereas, evidently our concern is, to *have no fellowſhip with the unfruitful works of darkneſs, but rather reprove them*; to preſerve our own ſouls from the epidemic diſtemper, and warn thoſe around us of the danger of being infected. But it is with the ſecurity of our perſonal innocence, that we are to begin: without which we ſhall ſeldom in earneſt attempt, ſcarce ever ſucceſsfully proſecute the reformation of any one elſe: nor will the greateſt ſucceſs in ſuch endeavours avail us, if, as our apoſtle expreſſes it, *when we have preached to others, we ourſelves are caſt away**.

The firſt and principal conſideration then is, how to avoid any *fellowſhip with the unfruitful*, a gentle term, which means pernicious, *works of darkneſs*. Now a main point of caution againſt all ſorts of peril is to know, from whence chiefly we are to apprehend it. But who can ſay, from what quarter our virtue runs the greateſt riſque, in a world ſo thick ſet round with various temptations: where all vices are ſo common, that it ſeems a matter of courſe, and almoſt of neceſſity, to indulge one or another; and the majority of the guilty is ſo large, that each conſiders himſelf, in ſome degree, as ſafe in the crowd even from divine diſpleaſure, *numbering himſelf amongſt the multitude of ſinners*, and not *remembring that wrath will not tarry long*†: where our eyes and our ears continually preſent to our imaginations crimes, of which elſe we ſhould never have thought, and ſuggeſt eaſy methods of attaining what we believed to be as impracticable, as we know it to be unlawful: where the proſperity of ill men ſo ſtrongly prompts us to envy their condition, imitate their preſumptuouſneſs, and doubt of a ſuperintending power: where every natural inclination that we have meets with ſomething to inflame it beyond bounds, or turn it aſide from its proper object: where fear of inconveniencies threatening upright conduct, and hope of gaining advantages by deviations from it, work within us continually: where injuries, real or fancied, are daily provoking us to injure or hate in return; and even friendſhip and kind affection, meeting too often with undeſerving objects, make us partial and

* 1 Cor. ix. 27. † Eccluſ. vii. 16.

and unfair, ſubſervient to the purpoſes of the bad or injudicious, and criminally negligent of the merits of the worthy?

Here is already an alarming liſt of dangers: and yet one ſource of them remains unmentioned, ſo very fruitful, that probably it brings more of us to ruin than all the reſt: I mean, our ſtrong tendency to follow whatever precedents are ſet us: which being the great ſeducer of mankind to *have fellowſhip with* one another in *the unfruitful works of darkneſs*, I ſhall confine myſelf to the conſideration of it in the ſequel of this diſcourſe.

A diſpoſition to fall in with what we ſee others do is one of the earlieſt natural principles that we exert: and in itſelf a very beneficial one. For by means of it we learn, with eaſe and pleaſure, a multitude of things neceſſary or ſerviceable in life: conform readily to the inclinations of thoſe about us in a thouſand matters of indifference, and from mutual likeneſs become mutually agreeable. By the ſame means alſo, were patterns of piety and virtue more frequent, or we more attentive to them, we might be excited, as undoubtedly it was deſigned we ſhould, to copy, and even rival, each other's laudable qualities. But where things are capable of contrary uſes, we generally make the worſt of them: and in no caſe more than this. The example of evil, in a corrupted world, is by much the oftneſt in our view: which the weak and indolent imitate without reflexion; the good-humoured and pliable are drawn after them by the deſire of pleaſing, though in wrong ways; the vain and ambitious by fondneſs of excelling, though in culpable attainments; and almoſt all by the ſhame of ſingularity and dread of ridicule: till the numbers of the faulty being thus become abundantly ſufficient to keep one another in countenance, cuſtom refuſes to let its authority be any longer examined, and ſets up itſelf as the ſole rule of conduct.

For, even when we ſeem to act the moſt entirely from opinions and diſpoſitions of our own, theſe, upon inquiry, will be frequently found to derive, if not their original, at leaſt a great part of their ſtrength, from the deference that we pay to the notions and practice of the world. Thus men ſpeak and think ſlightly of religion, often without imagining they know any objection of weight againſt it: and yet how they can have

the very loweſt degree of belief in it, and not believe it to be an affair of the utmoſt importance, is quite inconceivable: but notwithſtanding they treat it, without ſcruple, as a ſlight matter, becauſe they ſee it commonly treated ſo. But this degree of depravity is not univerſal. We, perhaps, may blame thoſe who do ſo, and with marks of great ſerioufneſs profeſs ourſelves chriſtians: yet, it may be, are eaſy in tranſgreſſing, in a higher degree or a lower, as occaſion offers, almoſt every precept of chriſtianity, becauſe others, who call themſelves chriſtians alſo, do the ſame thing. We acknowledge that we are ſoon to leave this earth, and give an account to God of the part which we have acted upon it: yet perceiving, that moſt people about us overlook theſe awful truths, we can do ſo too, as abſolutely, as if we had no concern in them. And, to be a little more particular: what is it that makes us in our common diſcourſe ſo regardleſs of equity and humanity, ſo eager to ſpeak evil and propagate ſcandal? Surely not always malignity of heart: and certainly very ſeldom any peculiar knowledge of the caſe, or intereſt in it. But ſuch is the reigning turn of converſation, which we are wicked and weak enough to adopt and promote, at the very time that we inveigh bitterly againſt it, and ſuffer grievouſly by it. Again: how many are there who trifle away their days, in thinking of and doing nothing that tends to any good purpoſe, only becauſe trifling is faſhionable! How many are there who affect follies and vices, to which, at the bottom, they have little or no liking, which are highly prejudicial, and will probably be fatal to them, merely becauſe they are in vogue: and for no wiſer a reaſon will perſevere in them, when nature cries aloud to have them left off! How many diſtreſs and undo themſelves and their families, by imprudently vying with the luxury and expenſiveneſs of thoſe about them, nay, of thoſe above them! And, in general, from what is it elſe, than taking it on truſt from common perſuaſion, that poſſeſſing the things of this world is happineſs; though we not only may obſerve the contrary in all whom we know, but feel it in ourſelves; that we purſue them through ſins and through ſufferings of all kinds, and deteſt one another on account of them, at the rate we do? What, indeed, elſe could ſupport the abſurdity of ſeeking our chief good where plainly it is not, but that we all ſee one another do ſo;

and

and will perſuade ourſelves, againſt the fulleſt evidence, that ſo univerſal an attachment muſt be well grounded.

But the example of a ſmall part of mankind is often ſufficient to lead us into ſtrange errors. Where party-zeal of any kind prevails, into what monſtrous opinions of men and things, what utter diſregard to all truth and juſtice, to public ſpirit and humanity, will men run one after another! Indeed they will do things, when united in bodies, which, taken ſingly, they would abhor: nay, will think they juſtify their own behaviour, completely, by alledging only, that it is the ſame with that of their oppoſers, whom they condemn as the worſt of men. Sometimes a leſs authority than this proves able to miſguid us: and a blind prepoſſeſſion in favour of a few perſons, or a ſingle one, ſhall ſeduce us into a very unjuſtifiable imitation; and even make us, by the means of it, contemptible, or, by carrying it too far, guilty, when what we meant to copy was commendable, or however innocent.

Without ſpecifying more inſtances, or enlarging on theſe, the miſchiefs of being injudiciouſly *conformed to this world** appear ſo conſiderable, as to make the remedies which can be found for it extremely deſirable. Now, remedies of miſchiefs vary with their cauſes: which in this caſe are numerous.

1. Some *follow the multitude to do evil*† from mere inconſiderateneſs: poor creatures, greatly to be pitied, and yet ſeverely reproved. For, ſurely, enough depends on our chuſing right in life, to make us think about it: and there is appearance enough of errors in the common practice, to give us no little diffidence in a matter of ſuch moment. But mankind in general being thoughtleſs, each individual, as he goes on with the reſt, finding few or none different from himſelf to compare with, is hardly ſenſible of his own being ſo. Yet would we in imagination, ſtep out of the preſent ſcene of things for a while, conſider ourſelves as mere ſpectators, and view the courſe of them as they paſs before us, how amazing would the ſight be! The plain and only way to happineſs, through the faithful cultivation of piety and virtue, almoſt unanimouſly neglected: nations and ages treading, in mutual implicit reliance, paths leading to deſtruction: the leſs faulty ſurpriſingly apt

* Rom. xii. 2. † Exod. xxiii. 2.

to be diſſipated in a hurry of amuſements, or plod on in worldly buſineſs without higher attentions; the reſt, by irregular paſſions, and unlawful purſuits, making themſelves and their neighbours as wretched at preſent as they well can, and at the ſame time providing for unſpeakably greater miſery hereafter: every generation reminded, every ſingle perſon ſeeing, on one occaſion or another, in how wrong a courſe they are; yet ſhutting their eyes again, and going forward blindfold: none almoſt taking warning by the fate of his predeceſſors; but each leaving, in his turn, an uſeleſs admonition of his own to ſuch as come in his ſtead. *This their way is their folly: yet their poſterity approve their ſayings**. And ſhall we be of the number of thoſe who act thus: or rather aſſert our right to judge for ourſelves, where it concerns us ſo nearly? Such is the uſage of the world: but is it the dictate of conſcience, is it the road to happineſs? The multitude, *blind leaders of the blind*†, have they reaſon, have they ſcripture, have they the final event of things, to juſtify them? If not, let us chuſe a ſafer guidance; and apply the real rule of life to direct our ſteps: aſk ourſelves often, what we are doing, and what it tends to? Stop ſhort, wherever we diſcern ground for ſuſpicion; beware of plauſible pleas, for they often colour over the worſt actions; beware of indiſcreet compliances, for they border nearly upon criminal ones; and ever remember the ſon of *Sirach's* advice: *go not in a way wherein thou mayeſt fall. Be not confident in a plain way*‡. But above all let us beware of ourſelves: and recollecting, as we have but too much cauſe, our natural ſupineneſs, and forgetfulneſs of the cautions that we ſo often receive, *give the more earneſt heed to the things which we have heard, leaſt at any time we let them ſlip*§; and *ſet our hearts unto the words of God's law, for it is not a vain thing for us, becauſe it is our life*‖.

2. Others there are, not abſolutely thoughtleſs about their conduct, but diſtruſtful of their own judgment: borne down by ſo great an authority, as the practice of all mankind appears to be, againſt ſerioufneſs in religion and ſtrictneſs in virtue. But, univerſal as this practice may ſeem, there are many

* Pſal. xlix. 13. † Matth. xv. 14. ‡ Eccluſ. xxxii. 21, 22.
§ Heb. ii. 1. ‖ Deut. xxxii. 46, 47.

many exceptions from it amongſt all ranks, and ſome, God be praiſed, in the higheſt, of exemplary chriſtians, who, *in the midſt of a crooked and perverſe generation, ſhine as lights in the world**. But were the apoſtacy more general than it is, yet being the effect of mere inconſiderateneſs or ungoverned paſſions, what weight can there be in the moſt perfect agreement of perſons thus influenced? Or if ſtill the multitude together look formidable, ſeparate them; and conſider ſingly, of whom the whole is compoſed. The much larger part will be acknowleged at firſt ſight to be ſuch, as we ſhould be aſhamed once to think of taking for our directors, in a point of any conſequence. And for the reſt: the rich and great are rather peculiarly expoſed to temptation, and, of courſe, to fall, than qualified to diſcover and reliſh thoſe momentous truths and rules of life, which humility and retirement into ourſelves beſt diſpoſe us to receive. The learned and knowing are liable to be miſled into wrong judgements by the vanity of judging differently from common men; nor do they always act agreeably to what they inwardly think. And the reputed wiſe and able very frequently have never conſidered in earneſt what the true wiſdom of life is, but only buſied themſelves with a ſilly cunning to attain what they have raſhly and falſely taken for the end, at which they were to aim.

But further: this univerſal conſent, pleaded againſt obſerving the precepts of religion, is, when examined, no conſent at all. For as the vices of men are contrary to each other, and every vicious temper is full of inconſiſtencies within itſelf: no one immoral courſe will ever be generally approved, nor almoſt any one immoral perſon continue long of the ſame opinion. The only thing, in which we ſhall find them agree, is that, which they all by turns own, that the conduct of the virtuous is right; and their own, wrong. Here, therefore, a pious and diſcreet man will eaſily raiſe an inteſtine war amongſt the enemy: defend himſelf againſt one ſide by the authority of the other; indeed againſt all ſides by the authority of all: and in concluſion reſolve, ſlighting and pitying a divided giddy crowd, *in every good work to truſt his own ſoul; for this is the keeping of the commandments*†.

3. Another ſtrong inducement to have fellowſhip with the bad

* Phil. ii. 15. † Eccl. xxxii. 23.

bad customs of the world, is desire of being esteemed by it. But do the vicious really esteem one another? Do they not almost always hate, or despise one another? Or suppose that, for joining in their sins and absurdities, you were sure to receive their applause as your reward. Perhaps the whole meaning of it is at the bottom no more than this: they want to keep themselves in countenance, being conscious that they have occasion for it, by adding as many as they can to their number; and their good opinion of you is thinking you weak enough to be drawn in for one. Or perhaps the superiority, which your innocence gives you over them, is painful to them; and they would fain bring you down to their own level. Or they have some interested design upon you, or they consider you as an instrument fitted to amuse and entertain them: and so extol you, while they deride you. This, you see, is not being admired: it is being made a tool. But were it otherwise: consider a little; what can such admiration be worth? How long will it be likely to last? And what must the consequences prove, now and to eternity? Why then, instead of courting outward regard from those, who inwardly condemn themselves, do you not chuse to be respected by the wise and good, to enjoy the testimony of your own conscience, and to secure the important approbation of him, who hath said, *them that honour me, I will honour: and they that despise me, shall be lightly esteemed*[*]?

4. A further motive, which yet more powerfully inclines too many to unlawful compliances, is false good-nature and shame. They have so excessive a flexibility of temper, that they know not how to stand out against what the practice of the world recommends, and especially what their acquaintance invite and press them to, though they ever so clearly see the impropriety of it, and have ever so firmly resolved the contrary. Unhappy creatures, betrayed by dispositions, almost virtuous, into vice! The truly good-natured part, would they but reflect, is to lead others in the right way, not to follow them in the wrong: the truly shameful behaviour, not to be resolute, obstinate, if tempters please to call it so, in consulting our present and future welfare. *Beware of evil*, saith the son of *Sirach*, *and be not ashamed, when it concerneth thy soul. For there is a shame,*

[*] Sam. ii. 30.

*ſhame that bringeth ſin: and there is a ſhame which is glory and grace. Accept no perſon againſt thy ſoul; and let not the reverence of any man cauſe thee to fall**. *There is, that deſtroyeth his own ſoul through baſhfulneſs, and by accepting of perſons, overthroweth himſelf*†. But they, who have the misfortune to be of this make, ſhould by no means truſt to their own moſt ſolemn purpoſes, or even vows. Their chief ſafety is in flight; in avoiding, to their utmoſt, ſuch company and ſuch things, though ever ſo agreeable, as may endanger their innocence; and keeping at a diſtance from temptation, till they can bear it better. Thus they will eſcape at once the uneaſineſs of reſiſting and the hazard of yielding, and increaſe their ſtrength gradually by a cautious exerciſe of it: provided they reſt not in human means only, but, with faith and humility unfeigned, apply for and depend on the divine aſſiſtance, promiſed through Jeſus Chriſt; the neceſſity of which for every perſon, in every caſe, we preſume you always underſtand, and for that ſole reaſon we do not always expreſs it.

5. With this inward weakneſs is commonly joined an apprehenſion of difficulties from without: of public diſlike and cenſure for condemning the public taſte by a different conduct; or at leaſt of much ridicule, a thing full as hard to be borne, for doing conſcientiouſly what the world deſpiſes, and abſtaining from what it doth without ſcruple. But let not the danger of cenſure appear to any one ſo frightful. Indeed if perſons take abſurd or indifferent obſervances to the great duties; if they are ſtrict in their performance of one duty, and groſly negligent of others; or if to the performance of many there be added, either a vain deſire of making their own goodneſs remarkable, or the provoking ſin of uncharitableneſs towards others, they muſt not expect very favourable treatment. But an uniformly good chriſtian, without ſuperſtition, without affectation, and without ſourneſs, which are ſurely none of them virtues, may *live ſoberly, righteouſly and godly in this preſent world*‡, bad as it is, ever ſo long, without any great danger, either of making himſelf enemies by doing no harm, and as much good as he can, or of falling into contempt, for acting only as every man in his heart

* Eccluſ. iv. 20, 21, 22. † Ecclus. xx. 22. ‡ Tit. ii. 12.

knows he himſelf ought to act. But if ever this prove otherwiſe, inſtead of being *ſhaken in* our *minds** by it, let us conſider, how much more cenſure we ſhould incur and deſerve by a vicious life, to ſay nothing of other inconveniences: and above all, let us conſider that infinitely more important cenſure, which both we, and our ſcorners, are ſhortly to undergo: and ſince, as St. *Peter* argues, they who *think it ſtrange, that we run not with them to the ſame exceſs of riot, ſpeaking evil of us ſhall give account to him, that is ready to judge the quick and the dead*; let us *arm ourſelves with this mind, that we live not our time in the fleſh to the luſts of men, but to the will of God*†.

As for the ridicule, which ludicrous ſcoffers love to throw upon religion: we may avoid much of it by prudence, and deſpiſe the reſt with eaſe. It falls heavieſt on the pretences to piety made by the vicious; and we ſhall ſeldom be thought ſuch, if we are not: or on the reſervedneſs and formality of ſome, who are good. Now indeed it is never adviſable to go the utmoſt lengths of what may, ſtrictly ſpeaking, be juſt lawful; they adjoin ſo very cloſely on what is forbidden: yet there is a contrary extreme, an immoderate ſuſpiciouſneſs of innocent compliances. And they, who indulge it, lay a heavier burthen on themſelves than they need, perhaps than they will ſupport without ſinking under it. But at leaſt they rob their own minds of that ſerenity and chearfulneſs, which they might and ought to have enjoyed: they diſguiſe religion under a gloomy uninviting appearance, which is great pity; and furniſh the profane with a grievous handle for expoſing both them and it; till perhaps they at length grow aſhamed of their profeſſion, and make a ſudden exchange of their exceſſive rigour for the worſe errors of libertiniſm and infidelity. Therefore, in a moderate degree, on proper occaſions, let us not be backward to bear a part in ſuch cuſtoms of the world, as we are ſure we ſafely may: and let it, if poſſible, be a graceful one. On the other hand, whatever, though harmleſs in itſelf, may be a ſnare to us, or by our means to others, let us abſtain from it indeed reſolutely, but abſtain with an eaſy air and manner; keep our reaſons to ourſelves, rather than be eager

to

* 2 Theſſ. ii. 2. † 1 Pet. iv. 1, 2, 4, 5.

to mention them: or mention them, if it may do good, without exaggerating or inſiſting too vehemently upon any thing; but ſo as may beſt convince men of the ſolidity of our judgement, and reaſonableneſs of our conduct. Behaving thus, we may well hope to become objects, at leaſt after a while, of reſpect inſtead of deriſion, to which no part of genuine piety is on any account liable. And they, who ſet themſelves to make a jeſt of it, might without difficulty, if the ſerioufneſs of their caſe, and ſometimes pity, ſometimes juſt indignation, did not prevent it, have that weapon turned upon them, and be proved the moſt abſurd of all human beings. Their ſcrupulouſneſs of admiting the moſt indubitable truths of religion; and readineſs at the ſame time to acquieſce in the wildeſt imaginations, that are unfavourable to it: their ſchemes of making themſelves eaſy by counteracting the dictates of their own conſcience; and happy by tranſgreſſing the laws of infinite wiſdom and goodneſs, enforced by almighty power: their delight in the hopes of exiſting no longer than the ſpace of this tranſitory life, and their haſte to ruin health, fortune and reputation, all that can affo.d them enjoyment, in the very beginning of life: their earneſt purſuits of what they frequently deſpiſe at the time, and almoſt always nauſeate ſoon after they have attained it; and the tormenting inward conflicts, that they often experience, between two paſſions, both of them perhaps fooliſh, and both pernicious, which ſhall be preferred: ſurely theſe things, and above all their triumphing in the wiſdom of theſe things, and inſulting thoſe who are ſtupid enough to follow the rules of plain reaſon, and the directions of God himſelf from heaven, as the beſt guides to their preſent and future well-being, might, without any great effort, be ſo deſcribed, as to retort on their own heads a double ſhare of the contempt, which they are ſo liberal in throwing about them. But however unwilling or unfit a wiſe man may be to *anſwer fools according to their folly**, at leaſt he will ſee it to be unworthy of his notice; and go on, unconcerned, through the impotent attacks of it, in the ſteady practice of *whatſoever things are true and honeſt, whatſoever things are lovely and of good report*†; recollecting daily that awful and repeated declaration of the holy *Jeſus, whoſoever ſhall be aſhamed of me and of my words in this adulterous*

* Prov. xxvi. 4, 5. † Phil. iv. 8.

ous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. Then shall the righteous man,* as the book of *Wisdom* beautifully expresses it, *stand in great boldness before the face of such as made no account of his labours. And they repenting, and groaning for anguish of spirit, shall say within themselves, this was he, whom we had sometime in derision, and a proverb of reproach. We fools accounted his life madness, and his end to be without honour. How is he numbered among the children of God, and his lot is amongst the saints! Therefore have we erred from the way of truth, and wearied ourselves in the way of wickedness and destruction. What hath our pride profited us; and what good hath our vaunting brought us? All those things are passed away like a shadow; and as the dust that is blown away with the wind. But the righteous live for evermore: their reward also is with the Lord, and the care of them is with the Most High†.*

* Mark. viii. 38. † Wisd. v.

SERMON LXIV.

The Danger and Misery of Loose Morals, and of Licentious Associates.

Eph. v. 11.

And have no fellowſhip with the unfruitful works of darkneſs: but rather reprove them.

THE prevalence of impiety and immorality in the world, hath not only made the original duties of mankind more difficult, by increaſing the temptations to tranſgreſs them, but added to their number many new obligations of great importance, relating partly to the concern of preſerving ourſelves, partly to the charity of guarding others, from the general infection. Our own preſervation is doubtleſs to be the firſt object of our attention, as we are primarily intruſted with, and anſwerable for, our own perſons, and have by nature the ſtrongeſt ſolicitude for our own happineſs. But zeal for that of our fellow-creatures ought certainly to fill the ſecond place in our breaſts; and is a duty much too little regarded, even by the good; conſidering how indiſpenſably both religion and humanity, and indeed our common intereſt, require us to promote what is right and fit, and reſtrain each other from ſin and ruin, by all ſuch methods as we properly can. For every one is by no means qualified to uſe every method: and therefore, without prudent reflection, many may both labour and ſuffer much, without any proſpect of its turning to account: nay, may involve themſelves in guilt by immoderate eagerneſs to reform their neighbours. But, though all muſt conſult their own ſtrength and opportunities, and leave to thoſe who are better able, and to the providence of God, what they find themſelves unequal to: there ſtill remains to every one of us a pro-

per ſhare of this great work; and we ought to be faithfully diligent, within the ſphere of our influence, be it larger or ſmaller, to diſcountenance wickedneſs, and encourage piety and virtue, by all thoſe ways, to which God, having adapted our powers and circumſtances, hath conſequently called us. And as theſe vary greatly, ſo the apoſtle hath given room in the text for treating of them all, by mentioning the loweſt inſtance of due care in this reſpect, *having no fellowſhip with the unfruitful works of darkneſs*; and the higheſt, *reproving them.*

I. The firſt of theſe, barely not partaking in the bad actions that others commit, may ſeem perhaps to be ſcarce doing any thing for the oppoſite cauſe. And yet, as the common practice of ſin is the principal plea in its favour, it is of great conſequence to ſhew, that the practice is not univerſal: that there are ſtill perſons left, who fear God and love his laws, who abhor an unworthy deed, and deſpiſe a criminal pleaſure. The profligate, ſenſible that a virtuous character is the ſuperior one in ſpeculation, have nothing left, but to queſtion the reality of it in fact: and by reflecting very little, and converſing with ſuch only, or chiefly, as are like themſelves, they become by degrees almoſt perſuaded, that all men are wicked, and cannot be otherwiſe. This opinion extinguiſhes modeſty, as well as deadens conſcience: they triumph in their imaginary diſcovery, degrading as it is to human nature, and inſult the vanity of thoſe who preſume to think themſelves moral agents. It is lamentable to obſerve, how far they have ſucceeded in their monſtrous attempt to pervert the true order of things. While they *glory in their ſhame* *, too many grow aſhamed of what they ought to account their glory: would wiſh to have their performance of religious duties, and the regularity of their lives, unknown or diſbelieved, or aſcribed to ſome other motive than principle: or, it may be, a few faſhionable ſins imputed to them, to ſave their reputations. By the influence of ſuch prepoſterous baſhfulneſs, they often become at length what they deſire to ſeem: at leaſt they ſuffer others to fall, whom the authority of their example might have ſupported, and confirm the profane and vicious in their wrong notions and courſes. Another inducement, beſides cowardice,

* Phil. iii. 19.

cowardice, to this improper conduct, is an abhorrence of being thought oſtentatious: which hath the more weight, becauſe in all matters, and eſpecially in religion, whoever takes uncommon pains to make a ſhew, will be ſuſpected of not having much reality. But if affectation on that hand be a fault, affectation on the other is a greater; and the plain rule of behaviour lies between them: that every chriſtian go through his chriſtian duty with uprightneſs and ſimplicity; neither deſiring to bring the private parts of it into public view, nor labouring to make a ſecret of his faith and practice in caſes, where they would of courſe be ſeen. A natural artleſs procedure will as certainly vindicate itſelf, as diſhoneſt contrivances will be detected. And therefore let no fear to be thought, or, when occaſion requires, to let all mankind perceive that he is rightly thought, religious and conſcientious. The regulation of our appetites and paſſions, by reaſon and good ſenſe, can never be a ground of contempt. *Doing juſtice and loving mercy*, is honoured throughout the earth. And though it ſhould be added of the ſame perſon, who lives by theſe rules, that he alſo *walks humbly with his God* *: one doth not diſcern, why that ſhould leſſen the good opinion pre-conceived of him; or how thoſe who every day with abject ſervility are worſhipping others, no better than themſelves, for trifling intereſts, can pretend to think it meanneſs in him, that he honours and adores the maker and judge of all. Nay, let it be ſaid further, that he adores him ſuitably to the directions laid down in ſcripture: and conſcious of his own ignorance, guilt, and weakneſs, is willing thankfully to accept inſtruction, pardon, aſſiſtance, and eternal life, the free gifts of his heavenly Father, on the giver's terms, through faith in the merits of *Jeſus Chriſt*, and the grace of the Holy Spirit; ſtill who hath a right to blame him, unleſs he can prove, which no one ever hath done or will, that this is not the way to happineſs here and hereafter, and that any other is? A virtuous, a religious, a chriſtian character then, as it always deſerves, will generally command reſpect: its amiableneſs, its importance to public, to private welfare, will be viſible. And, in proportion as numbers appear poſſeſſed of it, the vicious will be awed into ſilence, and the modeſter part of them at leaſt into outward imitation,

* Mic. vi. 8.

imitation, which may produce in time, through God's grace, inward ſerioufneſs. But, however theſe may be affected, all the well-inclined will rejoice in the protection, and improve by the example, of ſuch declared friends. Almoſt every one may do ſome good in this way, and poſſibly far more than he imagines, merely by maintaining openly an uniform tenour of pious and moral behaviour, without taking any pains to call the attention of mankind to it. But the rich, the noble, the powerful, the learned, the ingenious, the admired, thoſe eſpecially in whom ſeveral of theſe advantages are united, may, barely by manifeſting themſelves to be ſuch as they ought, each of them ſingly reform or preſerve multitudes of their inferiors; and a number of them combined oppoſe and put to flight the reigning vices of the whole age in which they live.

Hence it is, that our Saviour hath laid ſo great a ſtreſs on the duty of *confeſſing him before men* *; and exhorted his diſciples thus, *ye are the light of the world; let your light ſo ſhine before men, that they may ſee your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven* †. Hence alſo St. *Paul*, alluding probably to the expreſſions of his maſter, though not preſent when they were uſed, ſaith of thoſe who are *blameleſs and harmleſs, the ſons of God, without rebuke*, that they *ſhine in the midſt of others as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life* ‡.

II. After exhibiting a pattern of goodneſs in ourſelves, our next care ſhould be to promote in a proper manner, on all fit occaſions, the eſteem of whatever is good in others. The generality attend not enough to moral excellencies, and too often conſider them in a wrong point of view: by which means they overlook, or ſometimes conceive prejudices againſt, what they would elſe honour, and be proud to imitate. Therefore, whenever favourable opportunities preſent themſelves, they ſhould be inſtantly ſeized: and the rightneſs, the lovelineſs, the beneficial fruits of each virtue ſhewn to ſuch as are not yet ſufficiently ſenſible of them: the ridicule, which hath been unjuſtly thrown on ſome duties, taken off; and the miſrepreſentations, which have rendered them contemptible, rectified: the plea of exceſſive ſeverity, urged againſt others, confuted; and the

* Matth. x. 32. † Matth. v. 14, 16. ‡ Phil. ii. 15, 16.

the real difficulty of practiſing them proved to be eligible, by the ſhortneſs of its continuance, and the bleſſed effects of overcoming it. At the ſame time we ſhould exemplify theſe truths, whenever we can, in the characters of the worthy: on whom we ſhould be always endeavouring to turn the eyes of our acquaintance; to place them and their actions in an advantageous light; to vindicate them from aſperſions; to convince as many as poſſible, how much more valuable, and conducive both to private and public welfare, a religious and honeſt principle is, than the moſt ſhining and envied accompliſhments, when ſeparated from it. Accordingly it ſhould be our ſtudy to cheriſh and recommend ſuch as are eminent for this merit; to ſupport and prefer their intereſts; to make them known and acceptable one to another; and forward amongſt them a general union, that above all things would gain them reſpect and ſucceſs. But,

III. Whilſt we are thus labouring to encourage virtue and religion, we muſt be extremely cautious that we obſtruct not our own work, by favouring any ſort of wickedneſs: that we never patronize, for the ſake of our own gratification, what may probably tempt unguarded innocence into ſin, or furniſh the ill-inclined with the means of committing it: that we contribute not to raiſe any bad or even ſuſpicious perſon to a condition of doing harm: that we protect not the guilty with our intereſt or power, nor varniſh over their faults from conſiderations of private intereſt or friendſhip: but fairly ſuffer truth to prevail, and crimes to be detected, as they ought. For whatever particular good purpoſes may ſeem, and perhaps but ſeem, to be ſerved at preſent by the contrary policy, they will never counterbalance the general miſchiefs ariſing from it. Further, we muſt not pay court to, or delight in the vicious, for the ſake of ſome wit and pleaſantry, ſome ſuperficial agreeableneſs, that ſets off their vices: we muſt never even ſeem to look on either villany or debauchery, as objects of mirth only; extol the entertaining qualities of him, that ruins others by them: or the abilities of the man, that uſes them to his neighbours wrong. Elſe we ſhall teach thoſe around us to eſteem and emulate them: indeed we ſhall accuſtom ourſelves to regard ſuch characters as accompliſhed and reſpectable, not as deteſtable; and come, at length, inſtead of pitying, to deſpiſe and ridicule thoſe who ſuffer by them: thus wickedly augmenting the triumph of the one, and the

the affliction of the other. *David* mentions it amongſt the diſtinguiſhing marks of him, who *ſhall abide in the tabernacle of the Lord, and dwell in his holy hill*, that *in his eyes a vile perſon is contemned; but he honoureth them, that fear the Lord**. And St. *Paul* ſeems to make it in ſome ſenſe a leſs crime for a man to live immorally himſelf, than to rejoice in others that live ſo: *who, knowing the judgment of God*, ſaith he, *that they, which commit ſuch things, are worthy of death, not only do the ſame, but have pleaſure in them that do them* †. We have from nature ſtrong appetites and paſſions in our corrupted frame, which tempt us ſo vehemently, and hurry us often ſo ſuddenly into ſome ſins, that perhaps we may not be altogether void of excuſe. But there is no original principle within us, that leads us coolly and deliberately to approve them in others. This therefore can only proceed from a peculiar and wilful depravation of heart, equivalent to what might be produced by many repeated acts of tranſgreſſion.

And here it muſt be obſerved, that voluntary intimacy with the wicked is one degree of ſhewing countenance to them, and ought to be avoided ſometimes, indeed, nearneſs of relation, connexions in buſineſs, the neceſſities of affairs; at others, common civility and decency of behaviour, which, though a weaker tie, it may be very unadviſable to break through, oblige us to keep up acquaintances of this ſort. And indeed what St. *Paul* obſerves of the heathens of his days, that if a man would not *company with* the groſsly wicked amongſt them, *he muſt needs go out of the world* ‡, is become too true even of the profeſſed chriſtians of ours. Beſides, a reaſonable proſpect of reforming the faulty may juſtify one, eſpecially of known and confirmed virtue, in converſing much with them, and being, what our Saviour was very truly though maliciouſly, called *a friend of publicans and ſinners* §. But to affect, or even permit, beyond what ſuch reaſons require, either friendſhips or familiarities with habitual tranſgreſſors of the laws of God, is on many accounts unallowable. On our own account we ſhould reſolve againſt it, for the ſake of our good name: which, in a world ſo cenſorious, it is difficult enough to preſerve, by the diſcreeteſt behaviour, unſullied; and therefore we

* Pſal. xv. 1, 4. † Rom. i. 32. ‡ 1 Cor. v. 9, 10.
§ Matth. xi. 19.

we muſt not hope to eſcape, if by ill-choſen company we give real ground for a bad opinion of us in ſome degree: and too fair a pretence for carrying it farther than probably we deſerve. And yet how ſoon we may come, by ſuch imprudences, to deſerve a much worſe opinion than we apprehend, cannot be foreſeen: conſidering, how prone both to imitation and to wickedneſs the human heart is, and how much this propenſity muſt be encreaſed, when we place crimes before it in ſo alluring a light, as that of their being practiſed without any ſcruple by our daily agreeable aſſociates. But were we ever ſo ſecure in all reſpects, there is a dignity belonging to piety and virtue, which ought to be ſupported; and is betrayed, when we mix unneceſſarily with the profligate and abandoned: whom beſides we thus make eaſy and harden in their unlawful courſes; nay, give them alſo the public credit of being regarded by us, and well with us; which may enable them to do we know not what harm. Beſides, by ſuch undiſtinguiſhing treatment of men, we diſqualify ourſelves from ſhewing that preference to the worthy, which is their due; and lead others, more or leſs, to ſlight the difference of characters, and, in probable conſequence, the notions of right and wrong. *That be far from thee, to do after this manner;* as *Abraham* ſpeaks on another occaſion: *and that the righteous ſhould be as the wicked, that be far from thee* *.

To ſuch degree then, as every one can, he ought to avoid the very appearance of theſe improper attachments: or, if he hath failed in point of precaution, muſt immediately think of the means of diſengaging himſelf. Sometimes a ſteady adherence to our duty is enough to effect it: and ſuch perſons grow weary of an acquaintance, whoſe conduct reproves them, and whoſe ears are deaf to their ſolicitations. But if that proves otherwiſe; and either the ſcandalouſneſs of their lives, or imminent danger of being at length perverted by them, requires a more ſpeedy and abrupt ſtep to be taken, we ſhall do well, on ſome flagrant occaſion, to renounce all commerce with them at once: which, at the ſame time that it ſets us free, may poſſibly make on them, by the ſtrength of the ſhock, a ſalutary impreſſion. Where the familiarity either cannot or ought not to be broken off, the degree of it, however, may be ſo moderated, or ſuch exceptions to it contrived in particular inſtances,

* Gen. xviii. 25.

that, paying ſtrictly all due regard to them, we may be known to diſapprove what they do amiſs: ſtand at a viſible diſtance from the faults of thoſe to whom we are neareſt: and be, like our bleſſed Lord, *holy, harmleſs, and undefiled, ſeparate from ſinners* *, though we preſerve, when called to it, a courſe of eaſy demeanour in the midſt of them. In proportion as our ſituation will permit us to vary our deportment from time to time, we may with-hold from them, when any enormities of theirs demand it, the uſual frankneſs and chearfulneſs of our converſation; and reſtore it on the proſpect of their amendment: we may alſo, and ſhould, be watchful to expreſs our delight in every right action they perform; to ſignify inoffenſively the affliction we ſuffer when they miſbehave; and thus move their good-nature, if any be left in them, to give us pleaſure, not pain, while we ſo evidently wiſh them well. But ſtill ſometimes neither theſe nor the preceding methods can be tried, at others they are ſure or likely to prove ineffectual: and therefore,

IV. We muſt have recourſe to that, which the apoſtle ſpecifies in the laſt words of the text, *reproving them.* Various perſons, indeed, on various accounts, we cannot *reprove for their works of darkneſs*: either having no acceſs to them, or no title to uſe that freedom. Or at moſt, we can only convey oblique reproof under ſome agreeable, or however inoffenſive, diſguiſe; or make a ſmall advance upon the borders of plain ſpeech, obſerving well on which ſide they are moſt acceſſible; and watching for the ſeaſons, when good diſpoſitions either prevail or may be excited. Nor ſhould we neglect any one of theſe honeſt artifices; for the ſkilful application of them may poſſibly enable us to gain ground, by unperceived degrees, on their inordinate paſſions and bad habits; and thus carry them ſuch lengths towards reformation, as we ſhould in vain have attempted, had they at firſt perceived the whole of our deſign.

But, in many caſes, more direct and home remonſtrances to the faulty are neceſſary: which, therefore, ſuch, as with propriety can, are bound to make; and whatever reluctance they may find to ſo painful a work, muſt, as the ſcripture directs, *in any wiſe rebuke their neighbour, and not ſuffer ſin upon him*: for

for omitting it is in the ſame place interpreted to be *hating him in their heart**. Timely admonition may ſtop him ſhort juſt at the entrance upon a wrong courſe, and ſnatch him out of imminent hazard unhurt. Even thoſe, who are farther gone, may yet be recalled, by a lively repreſentation of their guilt and danger, of which, perhaps, they had a very inadequate, if any, apprehenſion. But then we muſt be very careful, unleſs we would intirely loſe all influence, both at preſent and for the future, that we never bring a charge without having inconteſtable proof of its truth; that a genuine friendly concern be evidently the principle of all we ſay; that we expreſs more ſorrow than anger, where circumſtances will allow it; as they peculiarly do, where the perſon blamed hurts himſelf more than any one elſe: that we uſe tender expoſtulations by choice; and harſh expreſſions, but above all, terrifying and threatning ones, only when nothing elſe will prevent ruin. For this is, doubtleſs, the meaning of the apoſtle's rule: *of ſome have compaſſion, making a difference; others ſave with fear, pulling them out of the fire*†. And even where the ſtrongeſt marks of diſapprobation and diſpleaſure are needful, they ſhould ever be ſhewn without inſult or haughtineſs, without the leaſt appearance of loving to reprimand, without exaggerating any thing, or treating the frailties of human nature too ſeverely: indeed with ſuch attention to acknowledge and point out whatever in the general character of the perſon concerned is valuable, or in the particular circumſtances of the caſe excuſable, as may reconcile him, if poſſible, to the liberties taken with him, by the conviction that they are taken unwillingly.

Many other precautions, for the better ſucceſs of this good work, every one's prudence will ſuggeſt to him, in the ſeveral inſtances that come before him, according to the nature of the offence, the temper of the offender, and eſpecially the degree of authority which the reprover hath over him. Sometimes all authority is beſt laid aſide, and ſoftened into mere perſuaſion: ſometimes a moderate ſhare of its weight is wanted, to bear down a leſs complying diſpoſition: at others, its whole force is little enough to fetter a ſtubborn ſpirit. Here then we muſt each of us think and act for ourſelves: but with

* Lev. xix. 17. † Jude 22, 23.

this consideration ever present to our minds, that not only a total neglect of this duty, but a neglect of discharging it in the most effectual manner that is incumbent on us, will be imputed to us for guilt; as it was in the case of *Eli*; who having contented himself with gently blaming his sons, for what he ought absolutely to have forbidden them, and deterred them from. *I will judge his house for ever*, said God, *for the iniquity which he knoweth, because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not**.

When, therefore, mild representations have small effect, rougher treatment must be used. And if the offender grows hardened to private remonstrances, it becomes needful to apply the severer discipline of more open censure. Possibly he may yet retain sensibility enough to be moved by that: for which reason our Saviour appoints, that we observe a gradation: first, *tell our brother his faults between us and him alone*; then, *take with us one or two more*; and, lastly, *tell it unto the church*†; let the whole number of good persons, with whom we are both of us connected, try their interest with him. And if even that fail, and no hope at all remain of him; yet by-standers at least will thus both be put on their guard against suffering by him, and warned against imitating him. Therefore St. *Paul* directs; *them that sin*, doubtless meaning obstinately, *rebuke before all, that others also may fear*‡. Indeed were every one to be exposed for each misbehaviour of which he is guilty, or even all such as he doth not immediately reform; this procedure would be unchristian and inhuman: many good persons would pass in common esteem for very bad; and many blameable ones, but of whose recovery there is room for great hope, would be driven to despair of regaining any character, and lay aside the thought of growing better. But there is no need of being so tender about the reputations of those, who are totally abandoned to sin. On the contrary, it is of importance to the world, that they should be known for what they are: and not enabled to pass themselves upon mankind for worthy characters, by receiving the same regards with such in common speech and behaviour. *He that saith unto the wicked, thou art righteous, him shall the people curse, nations shall abhor him. But, to them that rebuke him, shall be delight, and a good blessing shall come*

* 1 Sam. iii. 13. † Matth. xviii. 15, 16, 17. ‡ 1 Tim. v. 20.

*come upon them**. There is frequently no other weapon left againſt ſuch perſons, but public infamy. The puniſhments of human laws in multitudes of caſes cannot reach them. Thoſe of a future life ſome have brought themſelves to doubt: many to overlook. But to the diſlike and abhorrence of mankind few or none can be inſenſible: and every one that deſerves it ſhould be made to feel that he doth. Wickedneſs is the great diſturber of the world: the bane of all peace and comfort, civil and domeſtic. Therefore every one hath a natural right to ſtand up and declare againſt it: a claim, that the diſgrace, which belongs to it, be inflicted on it. And in this cauſe good men ſhould act with ſpirit; aſſume the authority, in which their character will ſupport them; and not ſuffer guilt, which is by nature timorous and cowardly, to lift up its head: they ſhould unite in the common concern of oppoſing its progreſs; and, as the prophet expreſſes it, *be valiant for the truth upon the earth*†. A zeal, ſhewn uniformly by the virtuous againſt vice and that alone; keep free from all mixture of perſonal reſentment or private intereſt; appearing, by the ſteps which it takes, not to proceed from moroſeneſs of temper, but from principle, and conducted by a moderate ſhare of prudence, will eaſily reſcue itſelf from wrong interpretations, ſecure to itſelf reverence from the world in general; and produce much good, without proportionable hazard or difficulty.

It muſt, however, be confeſſed, that neither is every one qualified equally for ſuch a work; ſome, by nature, being little capable of exerting themſelves, or moving others, and ſome again of ſo warm paſſions, that they muſt not allow them ſcope, even in the beſt cauſe: nor will the ſituation and connexions of every one always by any means permit him to appear againſt ill actions and ill people in the manner that he could wiſh. Yet no one is left without the means of doing ſomewhat towards it: and all that we are able to do, without neglecting other obligations, is our duty. Whoever can look with juſt the ſame eye on good and bad, provided his own preſent advantage be out of the queſtion, hath no love of religion, or virtue in him. And whoever takes no notice of the difference will be ſhrewdly ſuſpected of not ſeeing or not regarding it. The cooleſt ſpectator of other wrong things that are done

* Prov. xxiv. 24, 25. † Jer. ix. 3.

done thinks immediately, when any happen to effect himſelf, that all ought to intereſt themſelves on his behalf, indeed can hardly do it too much. And therefore, when things are done, which affect the happineſs of others, the welfare of ſociety, the honour of our Maker, our Redeemer, and our Sanctifier, we ought to intereſt ourſelves for theſe. Perhaps we may object, that our concern would be fruitleſs. And ſo, perhaps, was that of *David*, when he ſaid, *rivers of waters run down mine eyes, becauſe men keep not thy law. My zeal hath even conſumed me, becauſe they forget thy words**. But certainly ſo was that of *juſt Lot*, who *dwelling among* the inhabitants of *Sodom, in ſeeing and hearing vexed his righteous ſoul from day to day with their unlawful deeds*†. Yet they are propoſed as objects, not of blame, but praiſe. And indeed uneaſy ſentiments on ſuch occaſions, however ineffectual otherwiſe, may improve us conſiderably, by reminding us, *that we are of God, and the world lieth in wickedneſs*‡; provided we carefully reſtrain them, which itſelf will be a profitable inward exerciſe, from running into exceſs. Beſides, whoever preſerves this due medium between indifference and vehemence, as he will be always prudently ſeeking methods of reclaiming, or at leaſt of checking the guilty, and conſequently ſecuring the innocent; ſo he will find more than any one elſe can ſuggeſt to him: and though hated by the bad, or diſpiſed by the thoughtleſs, for this troubleſome activity, will be eſteemed by many fellow-labourers, many converts whom he hath helped to make, many ready to fall, whom he hath ſeaſonably ſtayed and ſtrengthened. Or let him have ever ſo much cauſe to ſay in other reſpects, *I have laboured in vain, I have ſpent my ſtrength for nought: yet ſurely his judgement is with the Lord, and his work with his God*§.

* Pſal. cxix. 136, 139. † 2 Pet. ii. 8.
‡ 1 John v. 19. § Iſa. xlix. 4.

SER-

SERMON LXV.

The Importance of Self-Examination, and Consequent Reformation.

Lam. iii. 40.

Let us ſearch and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.

THE gracious and wiſe Creator of all things, as he hath made known to every creature, by a ſecret inſtinct, the way of life which belongs to its frame and condition: ſo to man *he hath ſhewn*, both by his affections and his underſtanding, *what is good, and what he requires of him.* Yet having placed him in a ſtate of trial, in which theſe inward principles might be perverted and miſlead him, he hath graciouſly ſuperadded external manifeſtations of his will for our ſurer and completer guidance: thus making our rule of duty evident and obligatory in the higheſt degree. No courſe of action is more plainly ſuited to the nature of any agent, than religion and virtue is to ours. For what can be more evidently natural, than for a reaſonable being to make reaſon his governing principle; for a ſocial being *to do juſtly, and love mercy; and* for a created one *to walk humbly with his God* *? Agreeably therefore to this peculiar deſtination, which allots to us employments worthy to fill up an eternal exiſtence, whereas inferior animals arrive very ſoon, without contributing almoſt any thing to it themſelves, at the ſmall perfection of which they are capable, and there ſtop: man is qualified, and, as revelation fully aſſures us, deſigned, for endleſs improvement in goodneſs and happineſs, but ſuch as ſhall depend on his own care and induſtry, excited and aſſiſted by the grace of God.

For this purpoſe, together with an inward perception of what is right and fit for us to do, and what is otherwiſe, we have

* Mic. vi. 8.

have alſo a faculty of ſelf-reflexion, which, preſenting us to our own view, ſhew us, what we have been and are. The exerciſe of this faculty is expreſſed in the text by *ſearching and trying our ways*; and elſewhere *by examining and proving ourſelves*, and knowing the thoughts of our hearts*†; which phraſes have their peculiar import and uſe. For as the temper and ſtate of our hearts is the great thing that we have to be concerned about in religion; ſo the conſideration of our ways, or the actions in which our temper is exerted and ſhewn, muſt diſcover to us the motives that influence it: juſt as, in the material objects that ſurround us, we learn, from particular facts and appearances, the general laws by which the frame of things is governed.

This faculty of moral reflexion, and the ſelf-approbation or diſlike ariſing from it, which we commonly call by the name of *conſcience*, is the character that diſtinguiſhes man from the beings below him; it is the principle that God hath endued with an evident right to direct our lives: and, according as we employ or diſregard it, we ſhall advance or go back in real religion.

The ſeeds of every virtue were planted in the ſoul of man originally, each in its due order and proportion, without any mixture of evil. Yet even then, for want of due cultivation by our firſt parants, they were fatally blaſted, inſtead of growing up to the perfection for which they were deſigned. But now, when our inward frame is ſo unhappily diſordered and weakened by their fall, watchfulneſs over it is become unſpeakably more neceſſary than it was at firſt. And ſince, with a nature thus prone to err, we are a conſiderable time from our birth before we reflect on our actions at all; and, after that, do it very imperfectly; it cannot fail, but our own bad inclinations, and the cuſtoms of a bad world, muſt have led us all aſide, more or leſs, from the right path, before we knew diſtinctly which it was. Nor have we, many of us, it may be feared, made ſo early or ſo effectual an uſe, as we might, of the faculty of ſelf-government, in that ſeaſon of warm and haſty paſſions which quickly follows the firſt conſiderable uſe of reaſon. And, if not, we may be ſtill ſurer of finding many things within us that want correction.

A great

* 1 Cor. xi. 28. 2 Cor. xiii. 5. † Dan. ii. 30.

A great part of thoſe around us, we ſee, are quite wicked. And in the few that are ſeriouſly good, the moſt ſuperficial obſerver and moſt charitable interpreter will diſcern a great number of faults and imperfections unreformed. Since therefore failures in point of duty are, from the nature of the thing, to be apprehended, and have in fact happened to all the reſt of the world: if we were not uſually, by a moſt prepoſterous kind of negligence, leſs attentive to ourſelves than to others, we ſhould be likely to perceive the moſt diſorders in that breaſt, with which we have the moſt opportunities of being intimately acquainted. But, at leaſt, there is ground enough for us to examine, what our ſtate really is: to *ſearch and try our ways*; that, if we have erred in any thing, we may *turn again to the Lord*.

And though it is very apparent, that ſuch a reſolution may have many good conſequences, and can have no bad ones, if executed in the manner, which every man's reaſon, and the word of God, will ſuggeſt to him: yet, for your further encouragement and direction, I ſhall lay before you particularly,

I. The advantages that may ariſe from this inquiry.

II. The chief things requiſite for performing it aright.

I. The advantages that may ariſe from it.

A conſiderable part of the wrong conduct of mankind proceeds, not ſo much from any ſtrong inclination to do amiſs, as from being ſo unhappily thoughtleſs, that the ſlighteſt motive is enough to determine their choice any way. We engage at firſt in this or that ſort of behaviour, we ſcarce know why or how: then go on of courſe in the way we have ſet out in, without thinking whither it leads us; and by uſe grow fond of it, and zealous for it; yet are too indolent all the while once to aſk ourſelves, perhaps, whether we are aiming at any thing; or, however, whether, it be at what we ought; or ſomething of little importance, if not hurtful or criminal. Now this caſe, without reflexion, is quite irrecoverable; and a little reflexion in time would eaſily ſet all right. Nay, even where vehement paſſions hurry perſons into follies and ſins, it was for want of this wholeſome diſcipline at firſt, that their paſſions gained the maſtery; and applying it ſteadily for ſome time will be a ſure means, through God's bleſſing, of reducing

them again to ſubjection. For there is no poſſibility, either of viewing a bad action, in a full light, without abhorrence, or of weighing its conſequences without terror. Wickedneſs, therefore, always baniſhes thought, and piety and virtue encourage it. A good man, far from being driven to hide his inward condition from himſelf, though he find many things that want ſtill to be amended, yet finds at the ſame time, ſo many, which, through the aid of God's Holy Spirit, are already grown, and daily growing better, that he feels no joy equal to that of his heart telling him, what he is. But the guilty mind is driven by fear and ſhame to ſtifle the voice of nature and conſcience, that ſtruggles in the breaſt for utterance. *Every one, that doeth evil, hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, leſt his deeds ſhould be reproved: but he, that doeth truth, cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifeſt, that they are wrought in God**. And therefore the Pſalmiſt ſpeaks of ſelf-amendment, as the immediate fruit of ſelf-inſpection. *I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy teſtimonies: I made haſte, and delayed not to keep thy commandments*†.

Nor doth it only excite in us good reſolutions, but furniſhes directions how to put them in practice. Reflexion will ſhew us, and nothing elſe can, by what defect within, or what opportunity without, each of our faults got ground in our breaſts: and which is the way to root it out again. For want of this knowledge, multitudes try in vain to correct the diſorders of their hearts and lives; and only here and there one recovers, as it were by force of conſtitution; whilſt numbers periſh, who might have been preſerved by a competent acquaintance with the method of cure. For every ſingle caſe requires to be in ſome degree differently treated; and muſt therefore, in order to it, be particularly ſtudied. Strong reſolutions indeed may ſometimes do a great deal: but very often ſtrength, unaſſiſted by ſkill, waſtes itſelf to no purpoſe: and the bad ſucceſs of vehement efforts ill-directed leaves little ability, and leſs heart, for further endeavours.

Another uſe of ſearching frequently into our paſt ways, is to preſerve ourſelves from the ſecret approach of future dangers. The firſt deviation from their duty is in moſt perſons but

* John iii. 20, 21. † Pſal. cxix. 59, 60.

but ſmall; and its progreſs, for ſome time, gentle and unnoticed by themſelves; till they have inſenſibly gone ſuch a length, that they are tempted to diſpair of being able to return. And therefore attending to little errors is the ſafeſt method to prevent great ones. But even where we have yet been guilty of none, obſervation will ſhew us many tendencies, that we have to ſin; many weak and expoſed places in our minds, unlikely to withſtand the aſſaults, that muſt be expected in ſuch a world as this. And hence we ſhall be forewarned to avoid the temptations that will endanger us; to prepare ourſelves for ſuch as we cannot avoid; and ſtrengthen our inward frame with ſuch care, that it may be proof againſt the various accidents of life.

Till this is done in ſome good degree, reflexion, though always of the higheſt uſe, will often be very unpleaſing, by ſetting before our eyes the diſagreeable view of our faults. But when we have tolerably well reformed and fortified our minds, then the exerciſe of it will grow delightful, every day beyond other. And when once we can ſay to ourſelves, on ſure grounds, that *we have fought the good fight**, and gotten the victory, and have only the ſcattered remains of the enemy left to purſue and deſtroy; how inexpreſſible will the ſatisfaction be to enjoy the approbation of our own hearts, and the conſciouſneſs of God's favour; to look back and ſee the dangers, from which we are eſcaped; to feel within, that a temper of piety and virtue is indeed the happineſs of man; and experience the continual increaſe of that temper, continually diminiſhing our burthens and ſorrows, and opening to us new ſcenes of enjoyment, to which we were ſtrangers before!

All theſe are general advantages flowing from the practice of ſelf-inſpection. But in many caſes it hath yet a more eſpecial good influence. A diſtinct knowledge of ourſelves will greatly ſecure us from the ill effects of flattery, which would perſuade us that we are what we feel we are not; and enable us to bear unjuſt reproach, thinking it *a very ſmall thing that we ſhould be judged of man's judgement*, when we can reflect with comfort, that *he who judgeth us is the Lord*†. Experience of our infirmities will teach us humility, and move us to compaſſion and forgiveneſs, according to the apoſtle's direction: *Bre-*

* 2 Tim. iv. 7. † 1 Cor. iv. 3.

*thren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, reſtore ſuch an one in the ſpirit of meekneſs, conſidering thyſelf leſt thou alſo be tempted**. Experience where our ſtrength, as well as our weakneſs lies, will ſhew us, how we are beſt able to ſerve God and our fellow-creatures; what we may attempt, what will be too much for us. And ſtrict obſervation of our own hearts will qualify us, beyond all things, to give uſeful cautions to others, and direct their ſteps in the right way.

But, in order to receive theſe or any benefits from ſelf-inquiry, there are,

II. Some rules to be obſerved for conducting it properly.

Of theſe the fundamental one is, that we conſider it as a religious duty; perform it as in the preſence of God; and earneſtly beg him, to ſhew us in a true light to ourſelves. *Who can tell how oft he offendeth? O cleanſe thou me from my ſecret faults*†. *Try me, O God, and ſeek the ground of my heart: prove me, and examine my thoughts. Look well, if there be any way of wickedneſs in me: and lead me in the way everlaſting*‡. A ſerious regard to the moſt awful, and yet moſt gracious of beings, will be a conſtant preſervative againſt all the errors, however oppoſite, to which we are liable in this matter.

Some are ſo very ſenſible before-hand of their own condition in general, that they are afraid of examining into it particularly: or, if they do begin the inquiry, they have not courage to carry it on. For the more we reflect on our faults, the more we muſt feel that ſhame and remorſe, which God hath placed in our minds, as he hath done the ſenſe of pain in our bodies, to reſtrain us from proceeding in what would deſtroy us. Now moſt perſons are willing to recover their bodily health, how much ſoever they ſuffer in the cure: but to regain a right ſtate of ſoul, on which all depends, they will bear nothing. So, becauſe their condition is bad, they let it go on to be daily worſe; rather than have the uneaſineſs of thinking of it, to make it better. Yet neglecting to look into our worldly affairs, becauſe we think them deſperate, every one owns to be wrong: and muſt it not then be infinitely more ſo in our eternal concerns, which can never be deſperate, but from our refuſing

* Gal. vi. 1.
† Pſal. xix. 12.
‡ Pſal. cxxxix. 23, 24.

refuſing to look into them? As ſoon, therefore, as any one finds an averſion to ſelf-inquiry beginning, he ſhould inſtantly break through it, ſet about the work, and never ſtop till he hath finiſhed it. For then is the ſeaſon of trial, that in all likelihood may determine his ſtate for ever after. The averſion will increaſe, if we yield to it; and the habit of ſin grow ſtronger: the next effort will be ſtill more uneaſy, and conſequently fainter, than the preſent; and all will end in a total deſpair of becoming what we ought. Yet, at the ſame time, we muſt reflect now and then, whether we will or not: and may, even by tranſient thoughts, undergo more pain to no purpoſe, than would have wrought a cure. But ſhould any thing happen, as many may, to awaken us in a full and laſting view of our condition, when perhaps we may be ſo far enſlaved to ſin, as to practiſe it on, with our eyes open to all its horrors; this would be a dreadful ſcene indeed. Or could we be ſo fatally ſucceſsful, as to baniſh thought intirely; it would only be loſing the ſenſe of part of our miſery, and, with it, all hope of happineſs.

Let us therefore neither be too tender, nor too proud, to bear inſpecting our hearts and lives: and, that we may bear it well, let us learn to moderate, if we have need, the uneaſineſs which it may give us. For every paſſion that we have may be raiſed ſo high, as to defeat its own end. And though we can diſlike nothing ſo juſtly, as our faults; and very few diſlike them near enough; yet if we diſlike ourſelves for them too much to have patience to think of them, and mend them; that runs into a new fault: and we ſhould check ourſelves for it, mildly indeed, but very carefully; conſidering well both our natural frailty, and our Maker's goodneſs: but eſpecially the promiſes of forgiveneſs and grace, which he hath recorded for our uſe in his holy word; not in order to reconcile us at all to ſin, but in a reaſonable degree to ourſelves. And how mortifying ſoever a needful examination may ſtill prove, it is ſurely worth while to ſupport the moſt painful reflexions for the preſent, when it will ſecure us a ſucceſſion of pleaſing and happy ones ever after; and verify that encouraging account, which the ſon of *Sirach* hath given of this whole matter: *Wiſdom exalteth*

*alteth her children, and layeth hold of them that ſeek her. He that holdeth her faſt ſhall inherit glory: and whereſoever ſhe enters, the Lord will bleſs.——At firſt ſhe will walk with him by crooked ways, and bring fear and dread upon him, and torment him with her diſcipline; until ſhe may truſt his ſoul, and try him by her laws. Then will ſhe return the ſtrait way unto him, and comfort him, and ſhew him her ſecrets. But if he go wrong ſhe will forſake him and give him over to his own ruin. Obſerve the opportunity and beware of evil**.

But moſt perſons are in the contrary extreme to this over-great ſenſibility; and by no means apprehend ſufficiently, *what Spirit they are of*†, or what lives they have led. The courſe of behaviour to which we are inclined, eſpecially if we have fallen into it early, and find others do not ſcruple it, we are very unwilling to ſuſpect of any thing wrong; very apt to ſtifle our ſuſpicions, if they riſe; and to take it much amiſs, if others intimate their judgment of, what ſurely we ought to underſtand beſt, our own conduct. Therefore, before we can at all depend on the good opinion we may entertain of ourſelves, we ſhould aſk our hearts, and make them anſwer honeſtly: have we ſearched our ways at all? Have we ſearched the whole of them? And have we done it with impartiality and diligence? Or winked a little, where we did not care to look; forgot a few things, that we had no pleaſure in remembering; and coloured over what we found, without it, would appear diſagreeable? A fond affection, even to others, can make us wonderfully blind to their defects: and much more may it in our own caſe. So that, unleſs we have examined with great accuracy, though *we know nothing by ourſelves, yet are we not thereby juſtified*‡: and what we may call the teſtimony of our conſcience, may be given ſo unfairly as to be of no weight. *For if a man think himſelf to be ſomething, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himſelf. But let every man* PROVE *his own work, and then ſhall he have rejoicing in himſelf*§. Let us, therefore, carry always in our minds the inſtructive remark of *Solomon*, that, *every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord pondereth the hearts*‖. And let us be careful ſo to ponder and judge our own hearts now, that we may be

* Eccluſ. iv. 11.——20. † Luke ix. 55. ‡ 1 Cor. iv. 4.
§ Gal. vi. 3, 4. ‖ Prov. xxi. 2.

be able, through the mercy procured for us by our bleſſed Redeemer, to ſtand his final judgement hereafter.

Nor muſt we examine only into the weak and ſuſpicious parts of our characters and conduct: but thoſe which procure us the moſt applauſe from others and ourſelves: for want of which, even vices, a little diſguiſed, may paſs upon us for great virtues; and we may be doing, with entire ſatisfaction, what we ſhould abhor, if we underſtood it right. This is the way to grow in love with our faults, inſtead of correcting them; and therefore we ſhould often call to mind that ſurpriſing, but too common, character of the church of *Laodicea*; *thou ſayeſt, I am rich, and increaſed with goods, and have need of nothing: and knoweſt not, that thou art wretched, and miſerable, and poor, and blind, and naked**.

Nor are theſe general grounds of caution the only ones; but every perſon will find, on inquiry, particular reaſons for being watchful and diſtruſtful of himſelf, in ſome point or other; ariſing, perhaps, from unhappy experience of failures, at leaſt from conviction of the dangers, incident to his natural diſpoſition, age, employment, company; and, which is a matter of no ſmall conſideration, rank in the world. For they, above all, ſhould be careful in ſearching their own breaſts, whoſe higher condition ſubjects them moſt to flattery, and removes them fartheſt from hearing cenſure.

But though it is very uncommon for perſons to carry their ſuſpicions of themſelves far enough, yet we may carry them too far; eſpecially if we examine ourſelves, as it may be moſt people do, only or chiefly when we are under ſome ſtrong degree of ſorrow or fear. For then we ſhall be apt not only to ſuffer groundleſs uneaſineſs, by thinking much too ill of our preſent ſtate, which is by no means a duty: but to diſpair, and lay aſide the endeavour of becoming better, which would be a deſtructive error. The proper time for ſelf-inſpection, therefore, is, when we are in the calmeſt and eveneſt ſtate of mind, neither careleſs and preſumptuous, nor terrified and deſponding. And we ſhould often repeat the work, place ourſelves and our actions in different points of view, and compare the reſult of our ſeveral obſervations, that one may rectify or confirm another.

* Rev. iii. 17.

other. Nor will it be at all ſufficient to ſee what we have been and are, without conſulting the word of God, as well as our conſciences, which may elſe miſguide us, to learn what we ought to be. And though it would be an unhappy weakneſs to affright or entangle ourſelves, by imagining the rule of our duty ſtricter than it is; yet it may be a fatal miſtake to flatter ourſelves, by imagining it leſs ſtrict: and the plain way is, firſt to judge of it reaſonably and uprightly, then to try our condition by it impartially and frequently. The more conſtant we are in doing this, the eaſier, the more beneficial, the more ſatisfactory, it will be: whereas long intervals will only give time for ill habits to ſtrengthen and multiply, till we ſhall have no heart to attempt a reformation of them.

And though the cloſeſt attendance on this duty may, at preſent, be far from producing all the good fruit we could wiſh, it ſhould never diſcourage us from proceeding in what we know to be neceſſary. Beginnings in almoſt every thing are laborious and imperfect: and we make a ſlow progreſs at firſt, even in what afterwards we come to excell in. The ſmalleſt ſtep we can take towards ſelf-amendment is advancing ſomewhat towards happineſs: and if our zeal continue, our difficulties will aſſuredly leſſen, and our proficiency grow quicker. For though *of ourſelves we can do nothing**; yet God *giveth power to the faint: and to them that have no might, he increaſeth ſtrength. They that wait on the Lord ſhall run and not be weary, they ſhall walk and not faint*†.

And as the worſt of men ought not to give up themſelves as incapable of becoming good, nor thoſe in the loweſt rank of goodneſs to deſpair of becoming eminent in time; ſo neither ſhould thoſe who are in the higheſt indulge too great a complacency in their own improvements; much leſs a contempt of others, or an imagination, which the great apoſtle diſclaims, *as though they had already attained, either were already perfect.* But the common duty of all, to expreſs it in his following words, is, *forgetting thoſe things which are behind, and reaching forth unto thoſe things which are before, to preſs towards the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Chriſt Jeſus*‡. Which that we may all obtain, he of his infinite mercy grant, &c.

* John xv. 5. 2 Cor. iii. 5. † Iſa. xl. 29, 31. ‡ Phil. iii. 12, 13, 14.

SER-

SERMON LXVI.

True Religion, the Evidence of a good Understanding.

Prov. ix. 10.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wiſdom: and the knowledge of the Holy is underſtanding.

WE all naturally deſire happineſs: we all know, that obtaining it greatly depends on a wiſe choice of our conduct in life: and yet very few examine, with any care, what conduct is likelieſt to procure us the felicity that we ſeek. The livelier part of the world, hurried along by a giddy tumult of paſſions and fancies, venture, with a moſt intrepid gaiety of heart, on whatever looks pleaſing to them: and are in much too great haſte for preſent gratification, ever to ſtay and once think, what may be the conſequences, either to others, or even to themſelves. The good-natured and flexible are eaſily drawn to follow the more active and enterpriſing of their acquaintance; and the thoughtleſs and indolent find it unſpeakably the leaſt trouble to let themſelves be borne along by the tide of cuſtom and faſhion, juſt as it flows and ebbs by turns. Yet ſurely reaſon doth not make part of our nature for no purpoſe; nor experience diſcover any thing more plainly, than the numberleſs miſeries that proceed from going on thus at all adventures.

Thoſe, therefore, who are a little more conſiderate, take a different courſe: yet often ſcarce a better, and ſometimes a worſe. They deſpiſe the weakneſs of being caught with every bait of preſent pleaſure, or abandoning their lives to the direction of mere chance; and follow, with great attention, art and induſtry, what the world calls their intereſt. But this being their only view, the diſappointed are totally miſerable; and,

more or leſs, all are diſappointed; the far greateſt part, very grievouſly. And the ſmall remainder, who ſeem to attain their wiſhes, betray, under the faireſt ſhew of outward proſperity, evident tokens, that they have very little inward enjoyment to compenſate for the many and long anxieties that uſually precede. Few things come up, even at firſt, to what they promiſed: and ſuch as do, fall below it very ſoon; leaving the mind, at beſt, languid and unſatisfied. But if ſuch perſons have taken, as they commonly do take, forbidden ways, amongſt others, to their ends; then additional uneaſineſſes croud in upon them: painful reflections on their paſt behaviour; ſolicitous apprehenſions of what may follow, both here and hereafter. For there is deeply rooted in the heart of man an inbred ſenſe of right and wrong; which, however heedleſſly overlooked, or ſtudiouſly ſuppreſſed by the gay or the buſy part of the world, will, from time to time, make them both feel, that it hath the juſteſt authority to govern all that we do, as well as power to reward with the trueſt conſolation, and puniſh with the acuteſt remorſe.

Others, therefore, ſee the abſolute neceſſity of bringing virtue and duty into the account, when they deliberate concerning the behaviour that leads to happineſs. And were the regard, which they pay to theſe, univerſal and uniform, their happineſs would be as complete as human nature and circumſtances permit. But too often they, who practiſe conſcientiouſly ſome duties, with ſtrange inconſiſtency, utterly deſpiſe others. And, which is ſtranger yet, many, who profeſs the moſt generous concern for moral obligations, quite forget the firſt and ſtrongeſt of them all, the reverence due to him who made us. The ties, which unite them to their fellow-creatures, they readily acknowledge: but unaccountably ſlight their abſolute dependence on their Creator, and the conſequent veneration, which they owe to that being, *of whom, and for whom, and to whom are all things* *. Now if any diſpoſitions are good, religious ones are ſuch. They proceed from the ſame principle, with the very beſt of others: the exerciſe of them is the nobleſt exertion of that principle; and yet ſome affect to ſet up virtue in oppoſition to piety; and would be thought deſirous to ſerve the

* 1 Cor. viii. 6. Heb. ii. 10. Rom. xi. 36.

the former, by deprecating the latter. Some again, who are more upon their guard, yet explain themſelves freely, on occaſion, to allow nothing further than this; that religion may be of uſe to keep the bulk of mankind in order: not reflecting, that the upper part have ſtill greater need of its reſtraints, than the lower; and that whenever it comes to be ſpoken of, as only an inſtrument of policy, it will be no longer ſo much as that. But lighter minds run wilder lengths by far: and abſolutely indifferent what harm may come of it, perpetually treat all ſacred ſubjects, as if freedom of thought about them conſiſted in pouring the utmoſt contempt upon them that was poſſible.

Yet perhaps very few, if any, of theſe, would they conſult their hearts honeſtly, do ſo much as imagine they have any reaſon to doubt, but a world, ſo viſibly full of beautiful order and gracious deſign, muſt have been firſt formed, and be ſtill governed by a moſt powerful, intelligent, and beneficent cauſe. This, the leaſt degree of conſideration, how elſe the frame of things could be what it is, will ſufficiently ſhew: and every advance in the knowledge of nature, makes the proof, in proportion, fuller and more obvious. If then there exiſts a ſovereign of the univerſe, almighty and all-wiſe, it cannot be a matter that we are unconcerned in. He, by whoſe pleaſure we are, and according to whoſe determinations about us we ſhall be happy or miſerable, is not a being unrelated to us: nor, while he continually ſuperintends every thing elſe on this earth with the exacteſt care, will he ever neglect the worthieſt object, which it preſents to his view, the affections and behaviour of his rational creature, man. He muſt expect every thing to act, as its nature requires. And having diſtinguiſhed ours with the knowledge of himſelf; he cannot have left it in our choice, to lay him aſide out of our thoughts, as if we knew him not: but muſt have intended, that we ſhould pay him thoſe regards, which are his due.

Now the firſt of theſe, and the foundation of all the reſt, is a proper temperature of fear and love: two affections, which ought never to be ſeparated in thinking of God; and, therefore, whichſoever is expreſſed implies the other. The text hath mentioned only *fear*: but evidently means that kind, which children feel towards a wiſe and good parent; which the Pſalmiſt had in his thoughts, when he ſaid, *there is mercy with*

*thee: therefore ſhalt thou be feared**. As God is infinitely good, and hath not only beſtowed on us all the temporal bleſſings, that we enjoy; but offered us, on the moſt equitable terms, through the mediation of his bleſſed Son, and the grace of his Holy Spirit, pardon of our ſins, aſſiſtance of our weakneſs, and everlaſting life; ſurely he is amiable in the higheſt degree: and inſenſibility to his goodneſs, whilſt we are moved with the faint ſhadows of it in his creatures, would be ſhocking depravity. But then he is alſo inconceivably awful; abſolute in authority, reſiſtleſs in power: we and all nature are intirely in his hands, and depend on the breath of his mouth. Such a being, we muſt own, *is greatly to be feared, and had in reverence of* the higheſt of *them that are round about him* †: much more then ought the ſons of men to contemplate him with abaſement, and even *rejoice in him with trembling* ‡. Far is this from being below the firmeſt and the braveſt ſoul. Not to feel a dread of God, muſt be the groſſeſt ſtupidity: and not to own it, the moſt impotent affectation. A worthy heart will think pride againſt its Maker the extremity of wickedneſs: and value itſelf on expreſſing zealouſly that loyal and thankful ſubmiſſion, which is due ſo juſtly to the King of all; that faithful and affectionate obedience, which his precepts claim, who hath bought us to himſelf, with his blood: that reſpectful and ready compliance to which his holy motions are intitled, who graciouſly *worketh in us both to will and to do* §. In theſe things conſiſts the true *fear of the Lord!* For as the text, though conceived in the moſt general terms, undoubtedly comprehended at firſt the whole of Jewiſh piety, we ought to underſtand it now, as comprehending the whole of chriſtian. And that practiſing this, is the true wiſdom of man, I ſhall proceed to ſhew you diſtinctly, by conſidering its influence

I. On the conduct,

II. On the enjoyment of our lives.

I. On our conduct.

Some indeed, miſtaking the dictates of ſenſuality and vanity for thoſe of reaſon, preſume to ſpeak of the author of our nature, as if, by giving us the ſeveral inclinations belonging to it, he had warranted the unreſtrained indulgence of them all: and

* Pſal. cxxx. 4. † Pſal. lxxxix. 7. ‡ Pſal. ii. 11.
§ Phil. ii. 13.

and ſo would make his being of no conſequence to our actions. But a little reflection will eaſily confute ſo wild an imagination; and ſhew us, with how great propriety the wiſe king hath ſaid, that *the knowledge of the holy is underſtanding.* He, who is perfectly holy and righteous himſelf, muſt have regard to what is right and fit in others. He, who hath provided with ſuch fatherly care for the common good of us all, can never have left us at liberty to defeat his purpoſe, by injuring and corrupting one another, and filling his world with confuſion and miſery at our pleaſure. He hath not planted in us paſſions, affections, and appetites, to grow up wild as accident directs; but to be diligently ſuperintended, weeded and pruned, and each confined to its proper bounds. He hath not endued us with a principle of conſcience, to be overborne by reſentments and intereſts, drowned in ſenſual gratifications, led captive by faſhions and fancies: but to be cultivated and improved; and then obeyed, as the guide of life. Its authority is derived from himſelf: and its judgement upon us will be finally affirmed by his own. For it cannot be, that the ſovereign of all the earth ſhould either fail to reward ſuch as dutifully promote his gracious deſigns, or let any one be a gainer by acting in contradiction to them. Theſe things every perſon's own heart, if permitted, will tell him very plainly. But our underſtandings are unhappily prejudiced in favour of our bad inclinations: and were they leſs ſo, the unaſſiſted reaſon of fallen man is able to trace out but a very imperfect ſyſtem of religion. And therefore to complete the aſſurance of its great truths, expreſs revelation from above hath given us undeniable evidence, that univerſal virtue is God's law, and eternal happineſs or miſery its ſanctions: adding at the ſame time whatever more particular notices, directions, and encouragements our condition wanted. Now what can poſſibly influence men, like ſuch a motive ſo enforced? And how weakly muſt they judge, or how ill muſt they mean, who would abandon ſo ſolid a foundation of right behaviour, to lay the ſtreſs of ſo important a building on any other!

It would both be unjuſt and unwiſe to reject the ſmalleſt inducement to any part of goodneſs: for we greatly need every one that we can have. But it is extremely requiſite to obſerve, where our chief ſecurity lies, and place our chief truſt there. The reaſonableneſs, the dignity, the beauty of virtue, are doubtleſs

leſs natural, and ought to be ſtrong recommendations of it. But how faint impreſſions do they make on the ignorant and ſlow of apprehenſion, on minds agitated with paſſions, or hardened in ſins! and indeed how ſoon do ſuch impreſſions, if ſingle and unſupported, fade away out of all minds, or dwindle into mere ſpeculation, amidſt the temptations of a bad world, the allurements of ſenſe, and the treacheries of *a deceitful heart* *! Again: the temporal advantages of virtue and bad effects of wickedneſs, ordinarily ſpeaking, are weighty arguments. But ſtill, how often doth that weight fall on the wrong ſide; or give little help, if any, to the right! In ſhort, many incitements to think and act as we ought, are in general uſeful: but none is at all times ſufficient, excepting only the fear of God *taught as the truth is in Jeſus* †.

This is one unchangeable motive, level to the apprehenſion of every perſon, extending to the practice of every duty, including at once every moral diſpoſition of heart, and every prudent regard to our own good. There needs but a thought to bring it with ſuch force to our minds, as will check the ſtrongeſt paſſions, curb the moſt extravagant levity of ſpirit, overbalance the greateſt temporal advantages; and make whatever is our duty appear, in the ſtrongeſt light, to be our intereſt. The fear of God can pierce the inmoſt receſſes of our minds, and ſearch the rightneſs of our moſt ſecret deſires. Reflecting well what his eyes ſees there, will make us ſee it in a point of view, that we never ſhould elſe; and put us on approving our ſouls to him by ſimplicity and truth: no longer attempting, as unhappily we are too prone, to cheat others and ourſelves with falſe appearances; but faithfully bewailing all our paſt faults, and watchfully guarding againſt all future ones, particularly, the conſciouſneſs of having ſuch a witneſs to each action and purpoſe, muſt powerfully incline us to be very compoſed and moderate in every proceeding, very mild and reaſonable towards every perſon. Reverence of God's authority will make us fear to injure the meaneſt of our fellow-creatures; ſince even he is under the protection of the Almighty. And hope of ſharing in his bounty will teach us to imitate it by the tendereſt exerciſe of humanity and compaſſion. Thus influenced, thoſe of higher rank would be public bleſſings and examples:

* Jer. xvii. 9. † Eph. iv. 21.

examples: their inferiors would love and honour his image impreſſed upon them: and all would endeavour to fill worthily whatever ſtation the wiſdom of providence allotted them: diſcharging conſcientiouſly the duties of the moſt laborious, and counting it an honour to ſerve God in the leaſt conſiderable.

But let us now enquire,

II. What effect the fear of God muſt have on the enjoyment of our lives.

Unqueſtionably it will make bad people uneaſy. But then it is both for the world's good, and their own, that they ſhould be ſo. It is not their thinking of their condition, that renders it a dreadful one. The leſs they feel it, the worſe it is: and feeling it to purpoſe will be the happieſt thing poſſible for them. Farther: this fear doubtleſs reſtrains perſons from diſſolute pleaſures, and diſhonourable means of obtaining profit, power, and advancement. But ſo doth virtue: ſo for the moſt part doth common prudence. And religion never forbids us even a hurtful gratification, but it offers us happineſs hereafter in return for our preſent ſelf-denial. Farther ſtill: we muſt own, it gives a peculiar ſerioufneſs and awe to the mind of man. But we have need to be kept in order by a ſenſe of God's parental authority: and without it ſhould quickly become ungovernable, miſchievous, and wretched. He requires us not in the leaſt to be gloomy and comfortleſs; or full of terrors, while we mean to do well: but freely permits us the chearfulleſt uſe of all our faculties, that is conſiſtent with innocence, and with making improvement in goodneſs our chief care, as it will be our chief felicity.

And if the thought of him doth moderate the livelineſs of over-gay diſpoſitions; it prevents, by ſo doing, many great evils, into which they would otherwiſe hurry us; and fills us with much more inward and deeply-felt ſatisfactions, than thoſe light and trifling ones, that only play upon the ſurface of an inconſiderate mind. Or did that compoſure, which piety introduces, leſſen our enjoyments for a time; yet, being what our ſtate on earth, which is in many reſpects a ſerious one, demands; if we are wiſe, we ſhall gladly conform ourſelves to the condition which God hath placed us in; and truſt him, that the conſequences will be happy.

Such indeed will every one, who makes the trial, ſoon find them. What pleaſure can be greater, than a full perſuaſion, that

that our behaviour is approved by him, who knows our hearts, and will reward with his friendſhip whatever we do aright? The world is generally a negligent ſpectator, and too often an unfair interpreter, of the beſt actions. This cannot but give uneaſineſs and diſcouragement to virtue, unleſs it be animated by nobler views. But the recollection, that God looks on with eſteem, ſets us above the cenſures of men, and even above their applauſes. For were all mankind to join in doing juſtice to exalted merit; how poor would the recompence be, and how low the delight, compared with his, who can lay open his principles and his behaviour, with humble confidence, before the Judge of all!

Then as to the ſufferings of this life; which, very frequently make up a great ſhare of it; religion entirely prevents many of them, by withholding us from the ſins and the follies that commonly bring them upon us. And it wonderfully diminiſhes the reſt, by looſening our attachments to what we muſt expect to be diſappointed in, or ſeparated from; and leading us, from the *broken ciſterns* of worldly comfort, to God *the fountain of living waters**; in the aſſurance of whoſe grace, our great intereſt is ſafe, under every change; and by the ſuperintendency of whoſe providence *all things work together for our good* †. What are the poor conſolations of philoſophy, or the amuſements, which thoughtleſs minds take refuge in, to deceive their ſorrows, compared with ſuch cheering reflections as theſe! ſtill, what is naturally painful, muſt be felt ſo; but the inſupportable part of every affliction is taken away, when we conſider it, as ordered by him, whoſe right to diſpoſe of us we muſt acknowledge, and of whoſe kind intention to us we may always be ſure

A heart, habitually formed to ſuch meditations as theſe, with what ſerenity muſt it paſs through its allotted pilgrimage here below! It hath nothing to fear: it hath nothing to hide, from others or itſelf. It can bear ſolitude, and its own inſpection. It can even rejoice in the ſenſe of his preſence, who is to others inexpreſſibly terrible; but to the pious ſoul an immoveable ground of ſecurity, an inexhauſtible ſource of happineſs. For indeed what greater happineſs can we wiſh to ourſelves, than to be placed under the fatherly guidance of infinite foreſight

* Jer. li. 13. † Rom. viii. 28.

ſight and power; borne up under all the calamities of life; and, which is the great point, exalted with the nobleſt hopes of what ſhall follow after death!

Our time on earth is ſo ſhort; and our pleaſures at beſt ſo languid and rare, and mixed with ſo many anxieties, pains and ſorrows; that ſurely it is a melancholy view, to think of ending here; and after a very few days are gone over our heads, becoming for ever, as if we had never been. Yet this is much more than irreligious perſons can poſſibly promiſe themſelves. Could there be no God, they would have no certainty, but that their beings might continue, and might be miſerable. For what is there that may not be, on the ſuppoſition of an ungoverned world? But ſince there is a God; ſlighting and diſobeying him muſt be crimes, and muſt be puniſhed. We may have little attention to this perhaps, in the tumult of youthful fancies and worldly purſuits. But when the cloſe of the ſcene approaches, and age or ſickneſs rouſes up reflection from its ſleep, then will the ſinner, in all likelihood, ſee, with terror unſpeakable, thoſe awful realities, of which, if he is never convinced in this world, he will only be the more wretched in the next. But the darkeſt hour to ſuch, may, with reaſon, be the joyfulleſt to him, who having faithfully acknowledged God in all his ways, perceives that now his work is over, and his reward at hand. Undoubtedly it is beſt to uſe no ſtronger expreſſions on this ſubject, than the leſs experienced may feel to be juſt: elſe, words want force to deſcribe the difference between theſe two conditions. It is true, not all pious ſouls are conſcious of it, juſt at the time of their departure. Frequently their ſetting ſun is obſcured by inſenſibility: ſometimes over-caſt by doubts and fears. But they ſhall inſtantly behold it riſing again, to ſhine with unclouded and encreaſing luſtre to all eternity. For *light is ſown for the righteous, and gladneſs for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holineſs* *.

Such then is the good influence of the fear of God: and his genuine fear can have no bad one. Reverence of a wiſe and holy being will never miſlead men into any thing wicked or weak. Falſe religion, indeed, may do both: and ſo may falſe notions of virtue or friendſhip, or any other valuable quality.

* Pſ. xcvii. 11, 12.

But this was never thought an argument in any caſe beſides, againſt being governed by the true; and yet leſs ought it in the preſent. God *muſt be worſhipped* by us *in ſpirit and in truth* *, let others worſhip him as wrongly as they will: and his laws muſt be obeyed, let ever ſo many miſtake errors of their own for ſuch. The danger of ſuperſtition is a very powerful reaſon, why religious belief and practice ſhould be watched over, and directed right: but cannot poſſibly be a reaſon, why diſſolute profaneneſs ſhould be encouraged or ſuffered. Let rational piety be thoroughly eſtabliſhed, and ſuperſtition falls of courſe. But if the former be rooted out, the latter will certainly grow up in its place. There is a natural bent in human minds to believe and reſpect an inviſible power: and if it be turned aſide from pointing, in a proper manner, towards its proper object, it will ſoon acquire ſome other form; probably an abſurd and pernicious one. Infidelity promiſes great freedom and enjoyment of life: but in fact it proves, in proportion as it prevails, a ſtate of madneſs and confuſion, of perpetual danger from others, of diſcomfort and deſperate reſolutions within mens own breaſts: and therefore, after ſome trial of it, they will eagerly run away from it into the oppoſite extreme.

True religion then being of ſuch importance, there are ſome things, which may juſtly be expected of mankind in its favour.

1. That they, who have not yet carefully ſearched into the grounds of it, ſhould not take upon them to treat it with ſcorn, or even diſregard. What ſo deeply concerns all men, and what the wiſeſt and moſt conſiderate of men have lived and died in the firm belief of, ought not ſurely to be thrown aſide, on hearing only a few ſuperficial objections, and ludicrous turns of words to its diſadvantage. There muſt need more than this to confute it; and therefore whoever, with little reading and little thought, finds much inclination to diſbelieve, ſhould learn to ſuſpect himſelf, inſtead of his creed, and be modeſt in proportion to his unacquaintedneſs with the ſubject.

2. It may be expected alſo, that they, who profeſs to examine, ſhould do it fairly. Moſt men will be backward to confeſs, that they wiſh againſt religion: becauſe it is confeſſing, that

* John iv. 24.

that they have reaſon to fear, if the univerſe be well governed. But each ought to think well, whether this be not ſecretly his caſe, and remove the prepoſſeſſion of his bad life, before he pretends to be an upright judge. After that, if he finds difficulties, let him remember, that they are to be found in every thing, and yet ſomething muſt be true. If he meets not with the ſort, or the degree of evidence, which he looked for: let him recollect, that a fair mind will be ſatisfied with any that turns the ſcale. If he doubts of ſome points; let him ſtill hold faſt thoſe, which remain undoubted; and preſerve that reſpect to religion in general, which will prove his beſt guide in every particular. Nay, were it poſſible for him to doubt of the whole; yet, ſince doubt is not certainty, his practice however ſhould be on the ſafer ſide. And if he ſees, as one ſhould think he muſt, that ſcepticiſm and infidelity will deſtroy the chief comfort of the good, endanger the virtue of all, and weaken the bonds of civil ſociety; never let the poor vanity of propagating his notions tempt him to be the author or promoter, of ſo dreadful a miſchief to human kind. But

3. The laſt, and moſt important thing of all to be expected is, that they who are ſo happy as to believe, ſhould ſecure and complete their happineſs by what alone can do it, a ſuitable behaviour. Too often the contrary courſe is taken: and many who had once ſome regard for religion, but unhappily accompanied with vicious indulgencies, force themſelves to throw it off, that they may ſin undiſturbed. But let no one imagine, that denying God will make the leaſt amends for diſobeying him; or that ſtifling our convictions can ever give any true peace; which is only to be had by enforcing them home on our hearts, and conforming our lives to them. This we have all need to do with the utmoſt care, amidſt ſo many, ſo powerful, ſo ſudden temptations to the contrary, as the world and the devil, and our own corrupt nature, throw in our way. And as the reverence of our heavenly Father is the moſt effectual preſervative, we ought to keep up that in its full ſtrength, by frequently repeating fervent prayer to him, and affecting meditations upon him. How intirely the exerciſes of devotion are laid aſide by ſome; and with what indifference, and even contempt, a mere outward ſhew of them, now and then, is juſt retained by others, who yet call themſelves chriſtians; too many of you, I fear, know too well: and it furniſhes matter of me-

lancholy reflection, not only to every pious, but every prudent mind. For good men muſt feel, that the regard, due to God, is a moſt inward, conſtant and awful one: and wiſe men muſt ſurely perceive, that neither can the common welfare be preſerved without morals; nor morals, without religion; nor religion, without worſhip; private worſhip, to ſtrengthen our own ſenſe of duty; and public worſhip, to ſpread it amongſt others.

On all accounts, therefore, it is our moſt important concern to cultivate and expreſs the affections of piety; which are indeed the nobleſt movements of our ſouls towards the worthieſt object, towards the attainment of the moſt bleſſed end: and to awaken ourſelves from the remiſſneſs, into which we are apt to fall, on his head beyond others, by reminding our hearts often, that God is preſent, and a future ſtate ſoon will be ſo; and how ſoon to any of us, none can tell. May we all reſolve, from this moment, to ſtrive earneſtly for a happy ſhare in it, through faith in the merits of our dear Redeemer, and a right uſe of the ſuggeſtions of the divine Spirit: to both whom, with the Father Almighty, be honour and praiſe, now and for ever! Amen.

SER.

SERMON LXVII.

The Meaning of the Expression, of Taking up the Cross.

MARK. viii. 34.

And when he had called the people unto him, with his diſciples alſo; he ſaid unto them, whoſoever will come after me, let him deny himſelf, and take up his croſs, and follow me.

EVERY word, which proceeded out of the mouth of our bleſſed Lord, muſt unqueſtionably deſerve a very ſerious attention. But ſome things being peculiarly needful to be known, or liable to be forgotten; to theſe, on proper occaſions, he demanded the eſpecial regard of his hearers: and as they were bound to pay it, ſo are we. Thus in the foregoing chapter, finding it requiſite to confute the Jewiſh traditions in favour of that ceremonial purity in their perſons and food, which led them to overlook the moral purity of the heart, we are told, that *when he had called all the people unto him, he ſaid, hearken unto me every one of you, and underſtand. There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him, but the things which come out of him*, wicked thoughts and their conſequences, *thoſe are they that defile the man: if any man hath ears to hear, let him hear**. With the ſame kind of ſolemnity he delivered the words of the text: which indeed had ſtill greater need of it, as the former contradicted only received opinions and cuſtoms; but theſe, the ſtrongeſt of our natural paſſions and appetites. *When he had called*, &c.

Taking up the croſs relates, in the primary and ſtrict ſenſe, only to ſuffering patiently for the truth†: a duty, God be thanked, leſs common amongſt us at preſent, and which therefore

* Mark vii. 14, 15, 16. † Vid. Suicer in Σταυρος, p. 1005.

fore I ſhall paſs over. In its larger acceptation it will be found to coincide with *ſelf-denial*: a word of great importance to be rightly apprehended, becauſe it expreſſes here the condition, on which alone we ſhall be acknowledged the true followers of Chriſt. The terms of ſalvation are indeed elſewhere laid before us in phraſes more intelligible at firſt ſight: but illuſtrating this darker one will not only contribute to prove that the different views of the chriſtian doctrine are all conſiſtent with each other, but diſcover to us the principal cauſe of our acting wrong, with the moſt effectual method of amendment, perhaps more fully, than any thing elſe can. I ſhall therefore endeavour,

I. To explain the literal meaning of the expreſſion:

II. To ſhew with what limitations it muſt be underſtood:

III. To ſet before you the obligation of the duty, comprehended under it; and its importance to our virtue and our happineſs.

I. To explain the literal meaning of the expreſſion.

We ſpeak every day of denying ourſelves ſuch or ſuch a pleaſure, that is refuſing to ourſelves the enjoyment of it. But the ſcripture ſenſe goes much beyond this, and extends to renouncing and diſowning ourſelves; throwing out of our thoughts the relation that we bear to our own perſons; and behaving with as little indulgence, as if a mere ſtranger to us, were in queſtion. Of courſe we have in general the moſt concern for thoſe of whom we have the moſt knowledge. And hence, in the ſacred books, knowing or owing any one ſignifies having a regard for him: and denying any one, the contrary. Thus wicked perſons are ſaid to *deny God, while they profeſs to know him**, and our Saviour in return will deny them at the great day, ſaying, *depart from me, I know you not*†. Thus alſo, in the Old Teſtament, when the children of *Levi* had ſuppreſſed a rebellion of the people againſt God and their lawful governors, by falling without diſtinction upon all whom they found engaged in it, *Moſes* deſcribes the heroic behaviour of that tribe in theſe terms: *who ſaid unto his father and to his mother, I have not ſeen him, neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children; for he obſerved thy word*

* Tit. i. 16. † Matth. vii. 23. xxv. 12. Luke xiii. 25, 27.

*word and kept thy covenant**: That is, they preferred their duty to heaven and the public, before the tenderest private regards. *Job* comes yet nearer to the phraſe before us: *though I were perfect*, which he had juſt been diſclaiming, *yet would I not know my ſoul*†; were I freer from faults than I am, it ſhould not tempt me to ſelf-partiality.

But indeed the context may ſuffice to ſhew the meaning of the text. Our Saviour had been foretelling his future ſufferings. *Peter*'s warm zeal for his maſter overpowered his reſpect, and he *began to rebuke him, ſaying, be it far from thee, Lord, this ſhall not be unto thee*‡. But the holy *Jeſus* immediately rebukes him in return before the diſciples; tells him he was, in the tendency, though not the deſign of his words, a tempter, an adverſary to him; and influenced by human weakneſs, inſtead of religious fortitude. *Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou ſavoureſt not the things that be of God, but thoſe that be of men*§. Then calling *the people to him* alſo, but in kindneſs to the well-meaning apoſtle, concealing from them the particular occaſion, he aſſures them, with that noble diſintereſtedneſs, which he ſhewed perpetually, that if they would become his diſciples indeed, they muſt *deny themſelves* and follow him: diſregard, as he did and ſhould do, every inſtinct and averſion, every paſſion and affection that belong to the human frame‖. And harſh as this declaration may ſeem, he hath uſed a harſher yet. *If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and ſiſters, yea and his own life alſo, he cannot be my diſciple*¶. Agreeably to which, St. *Paul* ſets it down at the head of a long catalogue of moſt dreadful ſins, that *men ſhall be lovers of their own ſelves***. But now it will be thought full time, that a doctrine ſo alarming ſhould

II. Be put under due limitations.

For, after all, ſelf-love being a part of that nature, which God hath given us, can we, or ought we to diveſt ourſelves of it? Is there any poſſibility of happineſs without it? Doth not religion apply to it as our main principle of action, recommend its precepts chiefly from their tendency to our good; and

* Deut. xxxiii. 9. † Job. ix. 21.
‡ Matth. xvi. 21, 22. § Matth. xvi. 23.
‖ See authorities of the fathers for this interpretation in Suicer, voc. Απαρτισμα Αρνησις.
¶ Luke xiv. 26. ** 2 Tim. iii. 2.

and even make our own *love to our ſelves* the meaſure and rule of that, which we ought to have for *our neighbour**? Why, doubtleſs theſe things are true: and ſo evidently true, that we may be ſure our bleſſed Saviour, whoſe life was in no reſpect unneceſſarily auſtere, and whoſe doctrine is every where elſe ſo rational and mild, could never intend to require in the text, and the few others that reſemble it, either that we ſhould deny and diſregard ourſelves intirely, which is impracticable; or uſeleſly, which would be unfit. And therefore, as he could not, without the utmoſt unreaſonableneſs, be ſuſpected of forbidding a prudent and virtuous ſelf-love, he might ſafely and advantageouſly employ the ſtrongeſt terms in prohibiting a weak and vicious one: for in ſuch caſes abatements at leaſt ſufficient hardly ever fail of being made. However, to prevent miſtakes and miſrepreſentations, he hath taught us more particularly, how to interpret all his injunctions of this kind, by interpreting himſelf the hardeſt of them; (that of *hating* every thing which we naturally hold dear) to bear only the comparative ſenſe of *loving* nothing *more than him*†, but preferring obedience to the laws of God before any other conſideration. For in the ſtrict and literal meaning, his apoſtle hath told us, *no man ever yet hated his own fleſh*‡.

Had he enjoined us a number of difficult obſervances, of which we ſaw not the uſe, we ought certainly to have believed they had one, and obeyed him implicitly. But ſince, on the contrary, he hath eſtabliſhed a ſpiritual religion, neither impoſing unaccountable reſtraints, nor encumbered with many or troubleſome ceremonies; we ought, both to receive it with moſt joyful reverence, and to preſerve it in that amiable ſimplicity, in which he delivered it: not laying on ourſelves any burthen, but ſuch as may enable us to bear the better what he hath laid on us; and much leſs uſurping dominion over the practice of others.

Extremely ill therefore hath the church of *Rome* underſtood the nature of chriſtianity, in appointing as proper inſtances of ſelf-denial, ſo many frivolous and vexatious auſterities of abſtinences and penances, that ſerve to no good purpoſe; and encouraging multitudes to make vows of living ſeparate from the world in poverty and celibacy, only to ſpend a tedious life

* Matth. xxii. 39. † Matth. x. 37. ‡ Eph. v. 29.

life in the meritorious employments of wearing different habits, eating different food, keeping different hours, and obſerving different rules in common things from the reſt of their fellow-creatures and from one another: as if it could be the intention of infinite wiſdom and goodneſs to ſet men on finding out new ways of being uneaſy and abſurd. They plead indeed, that ſuch methods habituate them to a ſpirit of obedience, and a readineſs of parting with their own inclinations. But obedience to God cannot be ſhewn by doing what he never commanded; and blind obedience to mere men he hath cautioned us againſt, inſtead of requiring it. We are to *deny ourſelves and follow Chriſt*: not to *deny ourſelves and follow* guides, equally fallible with ourſelves, into whatever extravagances they direct, that will only produce ignorance and bigotry in one part of the world, and contempt and abhorence of religion in the other. But theſe additional duties, which the church enjoins, they ſay, conduce to the more eaſy practice of thoſe which God hath enjoined. Why, ſome of them, in ſome caſes, may: and then they ſhould, with prudence and moderation, be uſed and recommended. But preſcribing by mere human authority a great number of ſuch things, at all adventures, for almoſt all alike, or for any during their whole lives, is an evident mark, either of wrong judgement, or bad deſign. To the inconſiderate indeed they make a ſpecious appearance. But if we reflect, how exorbitant a degree of ill-uſed power and wealth hath been artfully obtained by requiring them firſt, and occaſionally diſpenſing with them afterwards; how little good is done by them, that might not as well have been done without them; and how very much evil naturally muſt, and in fact doth, ariſe from them; needleſs difficulties and diſquiet to the good, falſe hopes to ſinners of compenſating for the wickedneſs which they continue to indulge, ſpiritual pride in thoſe who obſerve them rigidly, and uncharitable cenſures, nay often perfections alſo, of ſuch as do not; we ſhall be fully convinced, that ſuperadding thus imaginary duties to real ones is far from promoting the true intereſts of chriſtian piety. And indeed all hardſhips under which men put themſelves of their own accord, not being enjoined in ſcripture, nor evidently needful to preſerve them from ſin, and to raiſe their thoughts to a better world, eſpecially if they tend to promote rigour

and ſourneſs rather than mildneſs and humility, hurt inſtead of benefiting them, and diſcredit religion with others: which in itſelf is a *reaſonable ſervice**, and directs us *not to refuſe the good creatures of God*, but to *receive them with thankſgiving*†.

But ſome will aſk, is not this explaining away to nothing what Chriſt hath moſt ſolemnly commanded as a very important duty? How doth ſuch doctrine leave any room for ſelf-denial? And wherein after all will it conſiſt? I anſwer, in what human nature uſually finds much more reluctance to practiſe, than any of the ſeverities mentioned yet. For there are none, that wicked men will not gladly undergo, rather than quit their favourite faults. Beſides, the ſtrict impoſers of unneceſſary reſtraints on their fellow-chriſtians or themſelves in ſome points, generally make amends in others by proportionable indulgences of unlawful gratifications. And ſo, between both, it ſeldom fails, but ſin and ſuperſtition make a ſhift to go on, hand in hand, very comfortably. But the true ſelf-denial allows of no ſuch compromiſes. It is an abſolute and univerſal ſurrender of every part of us to the diſpoſal of our Maker: not only of the cravings of fleſh and ſenſe, but of ſelf-opinion, ſelf-will, ſelf-intereſt: of love and hatred, hope and fear: nay, not of our appetites and affections only, but of *every imagination*‡, of our underſtandings alſo, ſhort of that full conviction of truth, which the God of truth himſelf hath appointed for our guide. In a word, it is giving our whole ſelves away from ourſelves, as it were, into his hands; and determining, once for all, that not our own thoughts, inclinations, and deſires, ſhall govern us, but the laws of God: not *our will, but his*, however contrary to it, ſhall *be done*§. Theſe inward principles are, in a moral ſenſe, the man: and it is, in full propriety of ſpeech, denying and renouncing ourſelves, when what we ſhould conceive or wiſh or chuſe is laid intirely out of the queſtion, and the only thing regarded is, what heaven points out to us, to believe and do, whether by reaſon or by revelation. Mortification and ſelf-denial have both of them been often almoſt wholly miſapprehended; and even, when ſomewhat better underſtood, have been much confounded one with the other. But though nearly akin, they are very diſtinguiſhable.

* Rom. xii. 1. † 1 Tim. iv. 4.
‡ 2 Cor. x. 5. § Luke xxii. 42.

tinguiſhable. The former is killing, deſtroying ſin within ourſelves: the latter, diſowning and caſting off whatever is deareſt to us, in ſuch degree as is neceſſary to deſtroy ſin. And this being the nature of the duty, we need never fear, but occaſions of practiſing it will be frequent and trying enough. The much greater need will be to fill our ſouls with a ſtrong conviction of what I ſhall now endeavour to ſhew.

III. The indiſpenſable obligation of it, and its unſpeakable importance to our virtue and our happineſs.

That being, *of whom and to whom are all things**, whoſe nature is abſolutely ſimple and infinitely perfect, *cannot*, as the apoſtle expreſſes it†, *deny himſelf*. There is nothing within him, but rectitude and holineſs; nothing without him, but what wholly depends on him: and therefore his ſole rule of action muſt be his own good pleaſure. But the moſt exalted of creatures, being his ſervants and his property, are eſſentially ſo far bound to ſelf-denial, as not to do their own will, but the will of him who ſent them into life. And in proportion as the frame of any moral agent is compounded of ſuperior and inferior principles, the more he will be obliged to diſregard and deny the lower, in order to follow the dictates of the higher. But wretched man, fallen and ſinful, lies under a heavier neceſſity of this kind: for, made up of wrong propenſities, in the degree that he is, in order to *deny ungodlineſs and worldly luſts*‡, he muſt *deny himſelf* continually. Chriſt indeed hath procured us by his blood the means of recovery from this lamentable condition: but ſtill he only frees us from ſlavery, to ſubject us to a juſt and gracious government: *we are not our own, for we are bought with a price*§: and ſince by him we live, who *were dead in treſpaſſes and ſins*‖, we are to *live henceforth, not unto ourſelves, but unto him, which died for us, and roſe again*¶. So that both as creatures, and as fallen and redeemed creatures, ſelf-denial and ſelf-ſurrender is our indiſpenſable general duty. And we ſhall find it previouſly neceſſary to the right performance of every particular duty that lies before us.

Our appetites, paſſions, and fancies, are by nature many: and partly by the corruption of our nature, partly by voluntary

* Rom. xi. 36. † 2 Tim. ii. 13. ‡ Tit. ii. 12.
§ 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20. ‖ Eph. ii. 1. ¶ 2 Cor. v. 15.

tary indulgence, they are headſtrong and miſchievous. What muſt be the conſequence then, if we either ſtudy to humour them ſtill farther, or let them take their own free courſe? Plainly, they will become quite ungovernable, and multiply ſin and guilt upon us without end. The very thought of virtue and piety will ſo be excluded, as ſeldom to occur to us: and whenever conſcience doth adventure to ſound the unwelcome words in our ears, it will be ſilenced, overpowered, and baniſhed from the place where it ought to dwell and preſide. Sometimes it may carry a ſingle point or two: but ſtill, what upon the whole is uppermoſt in our hearts, will upon the whole govern our lives; and the occaſional victories, obtained now and then, will be attended with continually greater difficulty and pain, and therefore will be attempted leſs and leſs frequently. Look around you: look within you: what is our general condition here on earth? Immoderate deſire of wealth, or power, or fame, or pleaſure, or eaſe, reſentment, envy, vanity, ſome wrong inclination or other, it is well if not more than one ſprings up early: an ill-judging ſelf-love cheriſhes it without examination: we take it haſtily for granted, that here lie our happineſs, and accordingly purſue it: many, without ever putting the queſtion, whether virtue or religion forbid them or not. Others indeed do chance to reflect a little at times; ſome of them enough to form a ſort of reſolution, that they will quit ſuch and ſuch of their vices, perhaps all of them. But then, as they will, notwithſtanding, preſerve in general the ſame falſe tenderneſs for themſelves that they ever had, and leave to mere inclination or caprice the ſame dominion over them; it is eaſy to foreſee, that theſe reſolutions muſt have a very ineffectual, a very ſhort-lived influence, and every thing quickly relapſe into its former ſtate. So long then as we ſuffer it to be at all a determining reaſon for acting thus, or thus, in caſes of importance, that we have a mind to act ſo, there cannot be any hope of our behaving right with the leaſt uniformity or conſtancy: and the only way is, to ſtrike at the root of all our faults, wrong ſelf-indulgence, inſtead of cutting off little branches and twigs, that will ſprout afterwards faſter than before.

Nor is this of more conſequence to our virtue than to what is cloſely

cloſely connected with it here, and inſeparably hereafter, our happineſs. Every principle in our nature was originally placed there for our good, but, when corrupted and improperly exerted, produces harm to us. And in particular, the dear affection that we bear to ourſelves, if it ſeeks to attain its end by miſtaken means, muſt fail of it, and make us miſerable. The tender fondneſs that will ſuffer us to miſs no pleaſure, and bear no hardſhip, will as certainly deſtroy all firmneſs and health in the ſoul, as it doth in the body, and unfit us in both reſpects equally for what we muſt have to go through in life. Under this unhappy management, groundleſs averſions and pernicious deſires grow continually more vehement; wild fancies multiply; each of them claims the abſolute ſway, and we are torn in pieces by their contentions. Or if they rule more amicably by turns, the various purſuits to which they ſucceſſively prompt us, we often ſee at the time, are leading us to ruin: yet we know not how to be ſo cruel to ourſelves, as to prefer the united intereſts of this world and the next to a preſent favourite inclination. So we graſp momentary pleaſures, quickly followed by laſting uneaſineſs: are tormented by daily diſappointments in what we obtain, as well as what we aim at without ſucceſs: and very commonly, after innumerable follies and ſufferings, the whole ends in deſpondency and fourneſs, diſlike of ourſelves and every one around us, diſſatisfaction with the univerſal ſtate of things, and the very Author of it: whilſt, like ungoverned children, we know not what we would have, and nothing can pleaſe us. For the ſame gratification of every humour, that makes children both wicked and wretched, hath juſt the ſame effect on all thoſe, who, by treating themſelves in the like manner, contrive to be no wiſer throughout the courſe of their lives than they were at the beginning. But, whether, we go on to be toſſed through a reſtleſs variety of wrong purſuits, or fix on ſome one, that ſhall carry us forward more uniformly in error, it is in effect the ſame thing. By the one means or the other we are ſure to be miſerable, even in this world, and unſpeakably more ſo in the next, if we permit our own wills and paſſions to be our guides.

Therefore our bleſſed Lord, *the way, the truth, and the life,*

*life**, who perfectly knew, both what our nature and condition require of us, and what our Maker deſigns us for, hath pointed out the only wiſe method; that we *deny ourſelves, and follow him*: that, renouncing the indulgence of our own inclinations, we take his example and his laws for our only rule; and, without ſtanding to compute what we may loſe or ſuffer by it in this or that caſe, venture to give up body and ſoul in all caſes to his government; and ſeeking happineſs by no other means than obedience, truſt God for the conſequences. Were we but in ſuch a ſtate of mind, we ſhould have one invariable rule to act by, "This is my duty, therefore nothing ſhall ſeduce me from it: this is contrary to my duty, therefore nothing ſhall engage me in it." We ſhould have one general and full anſwer conſtantly ready for all temptations, inſtead of the manifold diſadvantages and hazards of debating particulars with each of them ſingly. Their force muſt be unſpeakably leſſened, would we but follow this direction in earneſt; never admit an inſnaring ſecond thought to creep in and puzzle a plain caſe, nor afford time to a vicious deſire to argue the point with us, and paint itſelf out in plauſible and inviting colours to deceive us; but, the moment we ſee it to be vicious, look on it in that ſole view, reject it without delay for that ſole reaſon, and think no more of it, elſe we ſhall be all inconſtancy and irreſolution, diſtracted between the *ſervices of two maſters*; ſometimes preferring one, ſometimes the other; then contriving a thouſand ſilly ſchemes to reconcile both, and entangled by every endeavour in freſh perplexities. Whereas, would we thoroughly give up our whole ſelves into the hands of our rightful Sovereign, and fix the regard we owe him for the one principle of our conduct; the preſence of that thought would awe into ſilence whatever was oppoſite to it; our bad inclinations would die away and be forgotten; good ones would ſpring up, and have nothing to oppoſe their growth; a better ſelf, *a new man created after the image* God would be formed within us, inſtead of that which we had put *off*†; and our advances in goodneſs would be aſtoniſhing: like thoſe of the pious Corinthians, whoſe charitable contributions, the apoſtle declares, were beyond his hopes: *but*, ſaith he, *they firſt gave their own ſelves to the Lord, and* then *to us by the will of God*‡.

This

* John xiv. 6. † Col. iii. 10. ‡ 2 Cor. viii. 5.

This indeed is the only way to be religious: and religion is the only way to be happy. For, the true good of man, let us ſearch for it ever ſo long, or fancy about it what we pleaſe, can never be found where it is not; and is only where our Maker hath placed it. All our capacities for it are of his beſtowing: our whole being is at his diſpoſal. If we withhold any thing from him, the holineſs of his nature, the honour of his government, bind him to convince us of our guilt and folly. If, on the contrary, we reſign all to him, he will *give us back richly to enjoy*, as the ſcripture expreſſes it*, all that is innocent and ſafe: he will reward us eternally hereafter for abſtaining from what would hurt us even here: and it is inconceivably abſurd to imagine we can provide for our own intereſts better, than by intruſting them with him. Nor perhaps in general do men imagine they can: but they ſee what is right, and dare not attempt it. A cowardly apprehenſion of pain in the effort keeps us in the far worſe pain of a divided ſtate of mind and life. We avoid ſome faults, and cannot prevail on ourſelves to avoid others. We reſolve againſt all ſin, it may be: but cannot reſolve againſt the things that we know will lead us into ſin: ſo we leave ſtumbling-blocks in our own way, and undo every thing as faſt as we do it. Then for a while ſelf-reflection cauſes bitter remorſe, but immediately ſelf-indulgence brings forth new tranſgreſſions; and, in this wretched circle, we go round and round to our deſtruction: whereas one thorough determination, well kept, of yielding up all without reſerve to God, would extricate us from this labyrinth, and ſettle us in a firm ſtate of inward peace: the preſent advantages of the change would be great beyond belief; the future, infinite: and thus the ſelf-denial our Saviour enjoins would appear to be the only true ſelf-love.

But then we muſt not think, that forming ſuch a reſolution is all that we need in order to accompliſh it. A vain opinion of our own ſtrength is one part of the ſelf that we are to deny: elſe we ſhall never have ſtrength to any real good purpoſe. Our bleſſed Lord aſſures us, that *without him we can do nothing*†. St. *Paul* aſſures us, that *we are not ſufficient to think any thing as of ourſelves*‡. And repeated experience hath given us all, I fear, too

* 1 Tim. vi. 17. † John xv. 5. ‡ 2 Cor. iii. 5.

too many proofs of this truth. If then we are wicked, our only way is, that, yielding to the convictions of God's word and Spirit, we apply in the name of our bleſſed Redeemer for power to *deny ourſelves and follow him*: that through him, as our high prieſt, we *preſent our* ſouls and *bodies a ſacrifice to God**, beſeeching him to accept the gift, to take and keep poſſeſſion of us. And though we think ourſelves ever ſo good, yet if we imagine we are become ſuch, or hope to continue ſuch, by our own abilities, we deceive ourſelves, and *know nothing yet, as we ought to know*†. *By the grace of God I am what I am*, ſaith the apoſtle; *I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God, which was with me*‡. *I am crucified with Chriſt, nevertheleſs I live; yet not I, but Chriſt liveth in me, and I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himſelf for me*§. Nay, laſtly, if we flatter ourſelves, that even by the means of help from above we have attained to a perfection of ſelf-denial, or of any other virtue, we miſtake our condition, endanger our humility, and neglecting to preſs forward, ſhall be driven back. Indeed, though perfection is aſcribed to men in ſcripture, by way of oppoſition to characters wilfully and eſſentially defective‖, and of compariſon with others of inferior goodneſs¶, and in reſpect of God's gracious acceptation through Chriſt *Jeſus***; yet, ſtrictly ſpeaking, the hope of ever attaining it here is vain, notwithſtanding that the ſtruggle to advance towards it ought to be inceſſant: for the nearer the approach, the greater the reward. But *who can ſay I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my ſin? For there is not a juſt man upon earth, that doth good, and ſinneth not.* When we put off theſe bodies, and not before, *that which is perfect being come, that which is in part ſhall be done away.* Our underſtandings ſhall be thoroughly enlightened, our affections completely purified, our wills intirely conformed to that of our heavenly Father; we ſhall love ourſelves only as bearing his image, and *God ſhall be all in all.*

* Rom. xii. 1. † 1 Cor. viii 2. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 10. § Gal. ii. 20.
‖ Job. viii. 2e. ix. 22. ¶ Job. i. 1. ** Col. i. 28.

SER.

SERMON LXVIII.

Our Saviour's Sovereignty over the Dead and Living.

Rom. xiv. 9.

For to this end Chriſt both died and roſe and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.

THE public offices of our church have led us, within a few months, through moſt of the principal tranſactions of our bleſſed Redeemer's life on earth. We have commemorated his condeſcenſion to take upon him *the likeneſs of ſinful fleſh* *, his ſubmitting to *fulfil* the *righteouſneſs* † of the Jewiſh law, and his early manifeſtation to the Gentile world; his faſting forty days and nights, and yielding afterwards to be *tempted in all points as we are, yet without ſin* ‡. Many of his wonderful works, many of his gracious inſtructions have been rehearſed in our ears; and very lately his moſt bitter ſufferings and death repreſented, as it were, before our eyes. We have accompanied him, from his ſorrows and agonies in the garden, through all the ſad variety of diſgrace and pain that he underwent, till *he bowed his head, and gave up the ghoſt* § on the croſs. We have ſeen his dead body pierced to the heart with a ſpear, taken down and interred, the ſepulchre cloſed, ſealed up, and guarded; his diſciples, though continuing to honour him, quite in deſpair about him: and yet we find him this day riſen again, to die no more.

Surely it is time we ſhould aſk ourſelves what was the meaning of ſo unparalleled a tranſaction, to which the attention of all mankind hath been called ſo ſolemnly ever ſince? It could

* Rom. viii. 3. † Matth. iii. 15. ‡ Heb. iv. 15.
§ John xix. 30.

not be merely to move our compaſſion with a piteous hiſtory, that God ſent his Son from heaven, to live in wretchedneſs and die in torment; nor to fill us with a vain admiration, that he raiſed him from the grave, and hath placed him at his own right hand. What then was the view and uſe of this moſt extraordinary diſpenſation? The text informs us. *To this end Chriſt both died and roſe and revived;* or, as it ſhould be tranſlated, and is elſewhere in the New-Teſtament, *lives again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living.* Every thing he did or ſuffered was ordained to accompliſh that merciful and awful ſcheme of providence, our Saviour's univerſal dominion over all; to make the obedient good and happy, and reward the diſobedient according to their works. This important doctrine I ſhall

I. Explain and prove. Then ſhew,

II. Under what obligations it lays us.

I. Chriſt indeed, as the eternal Son of the Father, had original glory and dominion before the world exiſted; *was in the beginning with God, and was God* *. But the apoſtle ſpeaks not here of that dignity and power which his divine nature always poſſeſſed, but which his human nature acquired, by dying and riſing and living again. It is true, the former part of his life contributed greatly, both by his doctrine and example, to ſet up that kingdom of righteouſneſs, over which he was to reign. And even then *the Father had given all things into his hand* †, *and committed all judgment to him* ‡. But this being done in conſideration of his future ſufferings, on them the foundation of his authority is laid in ſcripture. Thus St. *Paul* teaches, that, becauſe *being in the form of God, he was willing to take upon him the form of a ſervant*, an inferior and miniſtering nature, as ours is; and then, being *found in faſhion as a man, humbled himſelf* yet lower *unto the death of the croſs: therefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name above every name* §. But elſewhere he more determinately grounds his ſovereignty, on his paſſion alone; *We ſee Jeſus, for the ſuffering of death, crowned with glory and honour* ¶. And juſtly doth it intitle him to an authority over us, ſince it gained him a property in us. For ſin both ſubjecting men by its

* John i. 1. † John iii. 35. ‡ John. v. 22.
§ Phil. ii. 6—9. ¶ Heb. ii. 9.

its guilt, as debtors and criminals, to the juſt ſentence of God, and by its dominion, as captives and ſlaves, to the unjuſt empire of the devil; our Saviour, by delivering us in each of theſe reſpects, hath obtained a double right to us. By giving his life a ranſom to divine juſtice, he hath bought us to himſelf with the price of his blood; ſo that we are his in right of purchaſe. And having deſtroyed the tyranny of the wicked one over us, by the holineſs of the precepts which his death confirmed, and the efficacy of the grace which it procured, we are his again in right of conqueſt.

This authority, thus acquired, his reſurrection openly proclaimed; atteſting, not only in general the truth of his miſſion, but in particular the acceptance of his ſufferings for our redemption: and conſequently his title to govern us, and his power to raiſe us up again according to his promiſe, as he had raiſed himſelf. Hence, during the remainder of his continuance on earth, he founded and gave laws to his church; and being yet more ſolemnly inveſted with fulneſs of power on his aſcenſion to heaven, he ever lives to rule and protect it. Nor doth his ſovereignty extend over mankind alone, but the whole creation. For *God*, as St. *Paul* aſſures us, *having raiſed him from the dead, hath ſet him at his own right hand, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but alſo in that which is to come, and hath put all things under his feet* *: *that in the name of Jeſus*, as he adds in another place, *every knee ſhould bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and every tongue confeſs, that Jeſus Chriſt is Lord* †. In theſe words he is deſcribed both as high-prieſt and the king of the univerſe. His poſſeſſion of the former office is expreſſed by ſaying, that *every knee ſhall bow in his name*; for ſo it ſhould be tranſlated, not *at his name*, when his name is mentioned: though that be a practice, both unexceptionable and reverent. *To bow the knee* is to pray. So, *Eph.* iii. 14. *For this cauſe I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, that he would grant you to be ſtrengthened by his Spirit in the inner man.* Therefore to *bow the knee in the name of Jeſus*, is to pray in his name, as the perſon qualified and appointed to preſent our petitions to God, and derive his bleſ-

 ſings

* Eph. i. 20, 21, 22. † Phil. ii. 10, 11.

ſings upon us. The remaining part of the paſſage declares his kingly office: *And every tongue confeſs, that Jeſus Chriſt is Lord*; or, as St. *John* more emphatically ſtiles him, *Lord of Lords, and King of Kings* *. Nor are men only, but *all the angels* of God, required to *worſhip him* † as ſuch. Created beings, of how exalted rank ſoever, can only be *faithful as ſervants in the houſe of God, but Chriſt as a ſon over his houſe, which himſelf hath builded* ‡.

In what manner he governs the reſt of his works we are not concerned to enquire. Men he governs, by giving laws, which every one, who receives the knowledge of them, is bound to obey, and no one may add too, diminiſh, or alter; by forming thoſe who ſubmit to him willingly, into a regular ſociety, or univerſal church, provided with fit means of inſtruction, diſcipline, and grace; by improving them in all goodneſs, and ſtrengthening them againſt all temptation; by providing, that in the worſt of times *the gates of hell ſhall not prevail* § to aboliſh true religion: and gradually bringing on, according to his promiſe, that happy age, when *the kingdoms of this world ſhall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Chriſt, and he ſhall take to himſelf his great power, and ſhall reign* ¶. But however illuſtrious his dominion may then appear, the full manifeſtation of it, (for which every other act of his regal authority is opening the way) will be in that hour, when he ſhall *come with the holy angels to ſit upon the throne of his glory, and all nations being gathered before him* ‖, ſhall ſentence the wicked, both men and devils, to everlaſting puniſhment, but beſtow on the righteous life eternal. After which, the ends of this whole diſpenſation being now accompliſhed, he *ſhall deliver up his kingdom* of grace *to God even the Father* **, in whoſe kingdom of glory he *ſhall* ſtill *reign*, with him and the Holy Spirit, over his ſaints and angels, *for ever and ever* ††.

Such is the ſovereignty over all, which the Son of man firſt died to acquire; and then riſing again, lives to exerciſe. And as it extends through the whole creation of God, from the beginning to the conſummation of all things, no wonder, if the reaſons

* Rev. xvii. 14. † Heb. i. 6. ‡ Heb. iii. 3, 5, 6. § Matth. xvi. 18.
¶ Rev. xi. 15, 17. ‖ Matth. xvi. 27.—xix. 28.—xxv. 31, 32.
** 1 Cor. xv. 24. †† Rev. xi. 15.

reaſons and circumſtances of many particulars in it be incomprehenſible to us. Notwithſtanding theſe, as the main of it appears highly worthy of God, and no part evidently unworthy, we ought to believe the whole, on the ſtrongeſt and manifold atteſtations which he hath given us of its truth. The *preaching of Chriſt crucified* may ſeem *fooliſhneſs* * to the wiſe in their own imaginations. But whoever is duly ſenſible of his being in a ſtate, where we *know but in part, and ſee* what is neareſt to us *through a glaſs darkly* †, will be glad to receive, with implicit faith, that *wiſdom of God in a myſtery, which he hath ordained before the world unto our glory* ‡.

The foundation of the chriſtian ſcheme, that we are all originally prone to ſin, and actually guilty of it, is but too notorious. Now the mercy of our heavenly Father, though conſtantly ſhewn in a proper degree to every proper object, preſerves not the faulty from daily experiencing dreadful conſequences of their faults in this life, which the ſincereſt repentance will not ſingly prevent. And who can diſprove, what the New Teſtament affirms, and throughout implies, that we ſhould all have experienced yet worſe conſequences in the life to come, had not our bleſſed Redeemer done and ſuffered for us the things he hath? In general, that one perſon may, by interpoſing, and even bearing much, on behalf of others, avert from them great evils, and procure them great good, we are very ſenſible. And ſuppoſing us ever ſo ignorant, what connexion in particular there is between the ſufferings of Chriſt and our own ſalvation; we have no more cauſe to complain, than that we cannot learn, by what ſteps a friend hath delivered us from worldly danger, or by what efficacy a medicine hath reſtored our health. All that we are concerned in, all that we are to believe and do, we are plainly told. And if we are not told, what God alone is concerned in, the reaſons of his own counſels; we may well be content, that by this method we are brought to eternal felicity, without aſking, why rather by this, than any other.

Yet even to that inquiry ſome anſwer may be returned. The poverty and labour, the injuries and provocations, the ſorrows and pains, which our Saviour went through, with ſo perfect and conſtant a greatneſs and goodneſs of mind, afford the ſtrongeſt

* 1 Cor. i. 23. † 1 Cor. xiii. 12. ‡ 1 Cor. ii. 7.

ſtrongeſt confirmations of our faith in his doctrine, and moſt powerful incitements to practiſe the very hardeſt of his precepts. That we are not forgiven but on the condition of his undergoing theſe things, proves, that God hath an irreconcileable abhorrence of ſin, and a high regard to the honour of his government: while yet his providing for the performance of this condition proves equally, that he hath the tendereſt compaſſion for his fallen and helpleſs creatures.

Other footſteps of wiſdom in this wonderful tranſaction, an humble ſearch may undoubtedly trace. But whether many more, and yet weightier motives to it, may not ſtill remain behind, which perhaps it is impoſſible, perhaps unfit, for us to ſee at preſent, we cannot know, for we are not told. Who would venture to ſay of the moſt familiar object of ſenſe before him, that its only uſes are thoſe which he is able to diſcover? And ſurely we ought not to have leſs modeſty in points, that are ſo much farther beyond our reach. We believe, on the credit of men like ourſelves, many things to have influences, that we neither have experienced them to have, nor diſcern by reaſon that they muſt have. Why then is not God to be truſted, as well as our fellow-creatures? And ſince, in the affairs of this world, we often walk *not by ſight but by faith* *; what objection can there be againſt it in thoſe of another? Eſpecially conſidering, that we are only a ſmall portion of the whole, the reſt of which is almoſt intirely hid from us: and cannot even conjecture, what dependences there may be of one part on the other; and much leſs, what thoſe dependences may require.

It plainly appears, that men are by no means the only beings intereſted in our bleſſed Lord. The ſcripture teaches, that, as by *him and for him were created all things that are in heaven and are in earth, viſible and inviſible, and by him all things conſiſt: ſo by him alſo was God pleaſed, having made peace through the blood of his croſs, to reconcile all things to himſelf, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven* †: *that in the diſpenſation of the fulneſs of time, he might gather together in one all things in Chriſt; both which are in heaven and which are on earth, even in him* ‡. Such hints, as theſe, of a ſcheme of providence amazingly extenſive, were not given, either to gratify or excite our

* 2 Cor. v. 7. † Col. i. 16—20. ‡ Eph. i. 10.

our curiosity; but to admonish us, that, in the religious administration of the universe, there are particulars, not designed to be comprehended by us at present, but by some other part of the creation; things done *to the intent*, (as the apostle elsewhere more explicitly informs us) *that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be made known, by the church, the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose, which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord* *. Well then may it become us to be modest in judging of a plan so much too great for us; and to reverence, without expecting to search out fully, that *mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ, wherein*, we are expressly told, *are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* †. I proceed therefore now,

II. To shew under what obligations this dominion of our Saviour lays us. And these are, first to acknowledge, secondly to obey it.

If the original relation we bear to our Creator is to be owned and respected; the next we stand in, to our Redeemer, is as justly entitled to our regard. That one is taught by nature, the other by revelation only, makes no difference. Being equally real, they are equally grounds of duty: and neglect of either is alike profane. God, the great ruler of the world, may both administer the whole of it in such a form as he thinks fit; and vary the regulations of each part, as varying circumstances require. There can possibly be no more room to doubt, whether under the general laws of his moral kingdom he may form, from time to time, particular institutions of religion; than whether, under the general laws of human society, may be formed particular institutions of government. Suppose then a person were to advance, concerning the latter, what some bold writers have done concerning the former; were to profess an intire submission to the mutual obligations of rational beings at large, but an utter contempt of the peculiar statutes of the community, in which he lived: should declare, that the commands of the civil power were only a republication

* Eph. iii. 10, 11. "We know not what need there was to set up a head and chieftain, in opposition to *the prince of this world the prince of the power of the air*, &c. whereof there are more than obscure intimations in scripture." Locke's Reasonableness of Christianity, p. 530. Vol. I. of his works.

† Col. ii. 2, 3.

tion of the law of nature; that this being abſolutely perfect, nothing could be added to it, nothing preſcribed, which was not obligatory before ſuch preſcription; and that therefore all injunctions and determinations, by national authority, of what common reaſon had not enjoined and determined, were arbitrary, tyrannical and unjuſt; that public wiſdom, being always the ſame, muſt always direct the ſame things; and therefore different orders could never have force in different ages or provinces: would not theſe notions be extremely abſurd? And ſurely they are no leſs abſurd in religion, than ſocial life. If men may form themſelves with good cauſe into particular civil eſtabliſhments, God may form them with better cauſe into particular religious eſtabliſhments, ſuch as that of Chriſtianity. If our earthly ſuperiors may diſcern ſufficient ground as the condition and behaviour of their ſubjects alter, to put all, or any part of them, under new regulations, or grant them new privileges: much more may *our Father, which is in heaven* *, do ſo with us. If we are bound often to obey the appointments of human prudence without knowing the motives of thoſe appointments: well may omniſcience claim the moſt unlimited compliance. And if, laſtly, a dutiful attachment to the conſtitution of our country be a part of a worthy character; and wilful violation of it, diſloyalty to the ſtate: ſurely the heartieſt zeal for the ordinances of our better country is a ſtill more eſſential part; and deliberate contempt of them, rebellion againſt God: a dreadful crime always, but ſingularly heinous and fatal in the preſent caſe; becauſe theſe ordinances are calculated throughout ſolely for our good, temporal and ſpiritual, preſent and future: and nothing elſe can ſecure us the ſame advantages. The goſpel, beſides comprehending, and expreſſing more clearly, the whole of natural religion, ſuperadds alſo, ſuch aſſurance of pardon, ſuch means of grace, and ſuch glorious promiſes of eternal bliſs to body and ſoul; that little do they conſider their own intereſt, who would reſt their caſe, if they could, on the mere conjectures of unaſſiſted reaſon; which, though ſufficient to render the condition of thoſe tolerable, who have no other guide; yet muſt be owned, in compariſon, to leave ſinners much room for fear, and afford but ſmall founda-

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* Matth. vii. 11.

tion for lasting hope. Indeed, with these new advantages, christianity brings in some new precepts also; but none of them burthensome; and all of them conducive to our happiness, here and hereafter; provided we not only acknowledge the dominion we are under, but, which is the second and last point, obey it.

There are few who totally reject religion: but few also, who receive it thoroughly and effectually. Some trusting to the notional belief and formal practice of merely revealed truths and duties, allow themselves to despise, and occasionally to neglect moral obligations. This was the great error of the Jews in our Saviour's days: as in truth it hath been of christians in general ever since: and there cannot be a more pernicious one. But of late, especially in this nation, great numbers have fallen into the opposite error. Professing the highest value for morals, they have little or none for piety. Even that which nature dictates, they hardly shew any real concern for: and as absolute a contempt of the doctrines and appointments of scripture, though it may be all the while they think they believe in scripture, as they could do, if they denied it. Now very seldom will either the practice, or even the notions of morality, in such persons, be near so perfect as they should be. For disregard to God or to any of his commands, will soon bring on a farther disregard, both of right behaviour towards our fellow-creatures, and right government of ourselves: till, acknowledging virtue to be his law, we shall acknowledge nothing as virtue but what we like; leave out all uneasy restraints, put in all agreeable indulgences; and so have an excellent rule of life in pretence, perhaps in imagination, but in reality none at all. Or, supposing this to be otherwise: yet the duties we owe, to him who hath made us by the word of his power, to him who hath redeemed us from guilt and misery by his blood, to him who is ready to purify us by his perpetual influences, must be the principal ties we are under: and did the conscientious observance of them contribute ever so little, (though indeed it contributes more than any thing) to the good order of this world; still it is indispensably necessary to a purpose of far greater moment, preparing our hearts for the enjoyment and happiness of the world to come. We strangely mistake our case, if we measure every thing, as we are too apt to do, merely by its influence on the present

life. This whole ſcene of things is a ſtate of education and diſcipline only; we are forming and training up, by the laws of our Saviour's kingdom here, to ſuch a temper and ſpirit, as may render us ever bleſſed in it hereafter. No wonder, if now, in our condition of infancy, we ſee not the reaſon and uſe of every ſtep taken with us. Being ſure we are in kind and good hands, our duty and our wiſdom is to give up ourſelves intirely to God's diſpoſal. For we know not what we do, when we preſume to ſlight any part of what he hath preſcribed: only this we know, that *offending in one point*, is both in reaſonable conſtruction and in probable conſequence, being *guilty of all* *.

Religion, though ever in ſubſtance the ſame, hath been propoſed to mankind in different ſhapes, as the reaſon of things in different ages required. Under whichſoever of theſe diſpenſations we had lived, our buſineſs had been, humbly to conform ourſelves to it, and carefully to improve ourſelves by it, *walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameleſs* †. But as we are happily reſerved to the fulleſt and cleareſt, the moſt rational and amiable exhibition of faith and duty that the world ever ſaw or will ſee; we are ſurely bound to embrace it with peculiar joy; to obey from the heart every injunction of ſo gracious a maſter, as our bleſſed Redeemer; and, which is the end of all, make ſuch a progreſs in real inward devotion, benevolence, purity and humility, as will bear a due proportion to the advantages, that we enjoy. For it cannot be, that after thoſe demonſtrations of love, and thoſe means of improvement, which God hath given us in his goſpel, he ſhould only expect us to be as good as heathens: and yet are we not often worſe? But in vain do we call ourſelves Chriſtians, if names and forms be the whole of our chriſtianity: In vain do we call the holy Jeſus Lord, unleſs, by doing ſuch things as he commands, we become ſuch as he was. To this therefore, if we have any ſenſe of gratitude, the love of our Saviour muſt conſtrain us: to this, if we have any concern for happineſs, the fear of our judge muſt compel us. For, as the apoſtle, juſt before the text, hath moſt truly obſerved, *none of us liveth to himſelf, and no man dieth to himſelf: for whether*

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* James ii. 10. † Luke i. 6.

we live, we live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord *. In both ſtates we are abſolutely his property, and intirely at his diſpoſal. If we obey him, *we ſhall alſo reign with him; if we deny him, he will alſo deny us* †. Let us therefore always bear in mind his own awful words: *I am he, that liveth, and was dead; and behold I am alive for evermore, amen: and have the keys of death and of hell* ‡.

* Rom xiv. 7, 8. † 2 Tim. ii. 12. ‡ Rev. i. 18.

SERMON LXIX.

The Evidence of the Resurrection of Christ.

Acts x. 40, 41.

Him God raiſed up the third day, and ſhewed him openly. Not to all the people, but unto witneſſes choſen before of God, even to us who did eat and drink with him after he roſe from the dead.

THE reſurrection of our bleſſed Lord being the principal fact, on which he himſelf put the proof of his divine authority; and being that fact in particular, of which he eſpecially appointed his apoſtles to be witneſſes to mankind; it concerns the chriſtian cauſe very nearly, that the evidence of this point ſhould be undeniable. And accordingly it is obviouſly plain, that no impoſtor would ever have appealed to a method of trying his pretenſions, that required his being put to death before it could decide any thing: and that no enthuſiaſt would ever have conducted himſelf in ſo calm and prudent a manner, and taught ſo rational a doctrine, as our Saviour did. It is equally plain, that his followers could never be deceived, and imagine their Maſter alive again when he was not. They could not be deceived by their hopes and expectations: for they own, they diſpaired of it They could not be deceived for want of opportunities to find out the truth: for they declare, that he appeared a great number of times, to ſeveral of them ſingly, to all of them aſſembled, once to the number of five hundred, by day as well as by night, in very different and diſtant places, ſometimes unexpectedly, ſometimes by appointment: that they not only ſaw, but touched and handled him; that he walked and converſed and eat and drank with them; that he gave them theſe evidences for no leſs than forty days together; and then was viſibly taken up into the clouds before

before their eyes. If now it be poſſible for ſo many perſons to be miſtaken in all this, it is impoſſible for any one to be rationally ſure of any thing.

It may alſo be ſhewn further, that as they were not deceived themſelves, ſo neither did they intend to deceive others in this matter. There is no manner of reaſon to ſuſpect, that they would have done it, if they could. For ſuppoſing them to think he came from God; they might well conclude that God would take care of his own cauſe, and did not need their turning cheats to ſerve it. And ſuppoſing they now at laſt thought him a ſeducer; what could there be, either honeſter, or wiſer, or more likely, for them to do, than to confeſs their miſtake; with due indignation at his having impoſed on them ſo long, and drawn them into ſuch great inconveniences and dangers? But even if they had been deſirous to have ſet up an impoſture: they had evidently neither ſkill to contrive, nor courage to attempt, nor power to execute it. They were comparatively but a handful of men in all: and they had very lately had full experience, that they could neither truſt one another, nor themſelves: for one of them had betrayed his Maſter; the moſt zealous man amongſt them, had denied him, and all the reſt had forſaken him. The whole weight of authority, *Jewiſh* and *Roman*, was againſt them, careful to watch them, and (as they ſaw by the example before their eyes) determined not to ſpare them, if they went on. Then as for the people; they had never oppoſed the magiſtrates in any part of this affair; they had furiouſly joined with them in the laſt part; and there was not the leaſt likelihood now, of their undertaking the defence of a few unknown and mean men, who taught a ſyſtem of doctrine very unwelcome to their zealous ſpirits; and built it on a ſtrange fact, utterly contradictory to their ſettled opinions. For as they had no notion, that the *Meſſiah* was to be put to death: they could have none of his riſing again. Surely, in theſe circumſtances, if his diſciples had acted on worldly motives, their point muſt have been to provide for their own ſafety by flight and ſilence: and thus, for aught that appears, they might have been very ſafe. But if they reſolved to pretend a reſurrection; their very firſt ſtep muſt be to get the body into their power, that it might not be produced againſt them. And in this, guarded as it was, they muſt either have

have periſhed, or at leaſt have failed. Or had they ſucceeded; it muſt have been notorious, by what means they had ſucceeded; and the chief prieſts would have been able to give the world ſome better account of the matter, than that abſurd one of the ſoldiers, affirming, (what they could not know; and durſt not have owned, if it had been true) that, whilſt they ſlept, his followers came and ſtole him away. Or could they poſſibly have gone thus far undiſcovered: ſtill, what proſpect had they before them, by carrying on the ſame ſcheme, which their Lord had done, but to be perſecuted and put to death as he had been? They were perſecuted accordingly: ſome of them put to death ſoon; the reſt, after they had been harraſſed many years: yet all perſiſted in their teſtimony to the end of their lives. Now men will too commonly renounce what they know to be true, rather than ſuffer for it: but by no means chuſe to ſuffer, in this manner, for what they know to be falſe. Or however unaccountably obſtinate one or two may, by great chance, happen to be, numbers will not be ſo; eſpecially at times, and places, remote from each other. And it muſt be further obſerved, that not only theſe perſons continued uniform and unmoveable in their teſtimony, but they none of them ever diſgraced it, by any ſort of vicious or intereſted behaviour. And, though nothing, but love of truth, could induce men to join with them; and there was every poſſible motive beſides, againſt it: yet multitudes of all ranks in all nations did join with them, did ſuffer with them; did atteſt their performing the ſame miracles with their maſter, and enabling others to perform them: and thus they went on, till, with no other weapons, they and their ſucceſſors conquered the world.

All theſe things have been frequently and fully proved; few of them denied, no ſolid reaſon alledged for denying any of them: only ſmall cavils and difficulties have been raiſed, here and there: amongſt which, one that appears perhaps the moſt conſiderable, is grounded on what St. *Peter* mentions in the text, of his own accord, that our Saviour after his reſurrection appeared, *not to all the people, but to witneſſes choſen before of God.* Upon this it hath been argued, that ſelecting only a few perſons, and all thoſe out of his own party, to be his witneſſes, inſtead of permitting every one to ſee him that would, was a very ſuſpicious method: that he ought to have ſhewn himſelf

himſelf to all the people, for they were all concerned in the matter; at leaſt to all the rulers: for, if he had convinced them; the teſtimony of perſons, who had been ſo much his enemies, and were of ſuch weight and credit, would have ſatisfied the whole nation, and of conſequence the whole world. This objection, which may poſſibly ſometimes perplex believers, as well as afford a handle for profane talk to unbelievers, I ſhall make it my preſent buſineſs to anſwer.

And, in the firſt place, it miſrepreſents the fact. There is neither the leaſt proof, nor the leaſt probability, that any one, who deſired to ſee our Saviour after his reſurrection, was refuſed it. The apoſtles were choſen, not to be the only perſons, that ſhould ſee him; far from it: but to be the chief perſons, that ſhould go through the world, to teſtify they had ſeen him; and to inſtruct and ſuperintend thoſe, who ſhould believe on him. They were of his party indeed. But what could make them ſo? Nothing, but his doctrine and miracles firſt: and his reſurrection afterwards. For, though even whilſt he lay dead, they honoured him; yet their faith in him, as the *Meſſiah*, was almoſt dead too, till they ſaw him alive again. If ever ſo many more had ſeen him, and been convinced by it; muſt not they have become of his party alſo? and would that have deſtroyed their evidence? If it would, he could not poſſibly have any evidence, though he had appeared and convinced the rulers and the whole city. And if it would not, why were not the apoſtles, and other firſt chriſtians, good evidence? For aught we know, many of the five hundred, to whom he appeared at once, might be convinced by that appearance, and not before. But however that be, if an atteſtation of five hundred perſons, or a much leſs number to any fact, be not enough, no number can be. For if ſo many can, every one of them, either be deceived, or combine to deceive others; ever ſo many more may alſo: and then there is an end of human teſtimony. Therefore, in all caſes, a competent quantity of witneſſes to any action, or writing, is deemed ſufficient; and procuring as many, as could poſſibly be got, is never required. This indeed was a caſe of a very extraordinary nature. And I hope you have ſeen, there was proof of it to a very extraordinary degree: ſuch proof, that, had this one circumſtance, of our Saviour's not appearing to all the people, been ever ſo unaccountable; nay, had there been many other ſtrange ones beſides;

beſides; the direct poſitive evidence would have greatly outweighed whatever ſuſpicions could be raiſed from them, with any pretence of reaſon: and to more than ſuſpicions they could not amount.

God indeed could have given, no doubt, yet ſtronger proof than we have. But is he obliged to give on all occaſions, or any, the ſtrongeſt he can? Doth he give us ſuch, in the moſt important affairs of common life? Doth he give us ſuch, of his own exiſtence? And are we, for want of it, neither to believe any thing, nor act any way, in reſpect of this world or another? Can God be bound to gratify the fancifulneſs, the indolence, the obſtinacy of his creatures, ſo as to afford them ſtill more and more evidence, the more inconſiderate and perverſe they are? Or are not we bound, humbly to ſeek, thankfully to receive, and carefully to uſe, what he doth afford us? We may think indeed, that it had been greater goodneſs to afford us further proofs yet: and ſo we may think it would, for God to have done a multitude of other things, which yet he hath not done: for inſtance, to have made us happy, without putting us to any trial of our behaviour; yet this world is plainly a ſtate of trial, in which our preſent and future good, or evil, depends on our conduct. And why may not our fairneſs in receiving evidence be one thing tried, as well as our obedience, in acting ſuitably to it, another? Now the higheſt poſſible degree of evidence leaves no room almoſt for this trial. And therefore what our Saviour ſaid to St. *Thomas*, was perfectly juſt: *Becauſe thou haſt ſeen me, thou haſt believed: bleſſed are they, that have not ſeen, and yet have believed*[*]. That ſituation gives an opportunity for honeſt and candid minds, to ſhew themſelves ſuch, and be rewarded for it. And if it doth lead captious and unfair ones to ſhew themſelves too, and be puniſhed; how have they deſerved better?

But particularly, how had the Jews deſerved more, or to much, proof, of our Saviour's miſſion, as he had, before his reſurrection, vouchſafed them? They had ſeen innumerable miracles of various kinds, performed by him: they had ſeen ſeveral miracles of this very kind. Still, they had not only refuſed to acknowledge him, but deliberately rejected, condemned, and put him to death. Where then was their claim to

[*] John xx. 29.

to further favours? If he had forbidden his apoſtles to mention his reſurrection to them; and directed them to preach the goſpel only to the Gentiles; had it been unjuſt? But inſtead of this, he gave them, notwithſtanding, the firſt knowledge of it, with the ſame evidence for it, that he gave the reſt of mankind. And he had plainly foretold, that he would give them no more: that his diſciples ſhould ſee him after his death, and they ſhould not*. For indeed his commiſſion, ſo far as it related peculiarly to inſtructing them, was now at an end. The believing *Jews* were to make part of his church, in common with the *Gentiles*. The unbelieving ones he had no further eſpecial concern with, than to inflict on them, unleſs they repented, that puniſhment, which God had decreed. And on what foundation, after this, could they be intitled to his appearing amongſt them? Every nation, every perſon upon earth, ever ſince, hath had, and ſtill hath, full as good a title, and a better, to expect his appearing to them alſo. For if it were neceſſary, in order to give the Jews ſufficient evidence: it is neceſſary, in order to give it us. And if they might reaſonably hope for it as matter of favour, why not we likewiſe, who live ſo long after, and, I hope, have not deſerved quite ſo ill?

This objection therefore proves a great deal too much, and for that reaſon proves nothing; even ſuppoſing, that our Saviour's public appearance, after his death, would have had ſuch happy effects, as ſome have pretended. But indeed the conſequences of this, which God alone can know perfectly, (and therefore it might become us to acquieſce in his judgement) have certainly been conſidered very imperfectly by theſe objectors. For if our bleſſed Lord had appeared, either to all the people, or to all the rulers of the people, what is it likely would have followed?

If to all the people: many of them, to be ſure, had never ſeen him before his reſurrection: and therefore could have no conviction of it from ſeeing him after. Many had ſeen him but tranſiently in a crowd: ſome only when he was disfigured with ill-uſage, and ſtooping under his croſs: probably not a few had miſtaken for him the perſon, that carried it part of the way in his ſtead. Even when he was fixed upon it, and

* Matth. xxiii. 39. John xiv. 19.

lifted up; diſtance would hinder ſome, and the change of features, by agonies and death, would hinder others, from knowing him again with any certainty. Juſt as in the caſe of the blind man; one part would have ſaid, *it is he;* another, *he is like him**: but a third perhaps quite the contrary. Every one would have ſpoken, as their fancy or prejudices led them: his enemies would have magnified and triumphed in the difference of perſuaſions: and no certain judgment could ever have been formed, unleſs the many, who knew but little of him, had ſubmitted their opinions to the few, in compariſon, that knew him well: which poſſibly they would not. But if they had, this would have amounted to very little more, than believing the teſtimony of others, without ſeeing him themſelves at all. And whether the number, then preſent at *Jeruſalem*, of ſuch as were perſonally acquainted with him, might be greater, or leſs, than the five hundred, whom he appeared to at once, we cannot know. But were it much greater; ſtill ſuppoſe only, what is very ſuppoſable, that ſome of theſe had been induced, either then or afterwards, by promiſes, or threatenings, or puniſhments, to deny it was he; what perplexities muſt that have raiſed? And how much wiſer was the method, which God took, of ſhewing him to ſuch alone, as knew him thoroughly, and he foreſaw would teſtify their knowledge with uprightneſs and conſtancy?

If then, to avoid this endleſs contradiction, he had appeared to the chief prieſts and elders only: ſtill, ſeveral of them, in all likelihood, either knew him not, or but imperfectly. And had they all known him ever ſo well: it is far from certain, that, on ſeeing him, they would have believed in him, after what they had ſeen, without believing in him. Amongſt other things, they ſeveral of them ſaw *Lazarus* riſe, and more had opportunities of converſing with him after he was riſen. Yet they did not believe in *Jeſus* for that. They might have aſcribed this miracle, as well as others, to *Beelzebub*: or, as their ſucceſſors, down to this day, abſurdly aſcribe all of them to pretended magic arts. They muſt indeed have been convinced, that, by ſome means or other, he was riſen: but that would have made them no witneſſes for him. It appears by their

* John ix. 9.

their whole conduct, that they were convinced of it, without ſeeing him. Not only their bribing the ſoldiers; but their leaving his diſciples unmoleſted at firſt; their bearing ſo quietly all their boldneſs of ſpeech for ſome time afterwards; their ſuffering *Gamaliel* to expreſs his doubts, whether this matter were not of God; their following in part his advice, to let them alone, which was founded on thoſe doubts; inſtead of proſecuting them to the utmoſt, as impoſtors: in ſhort, their whole hiſtory, in the beginning of the *Acts*; and particularly ſeveral things in it, which St. *Luke* doth not ſeem once to have thought of applying to this purpoſe, evidently ſhew, that the Jewiſh rulers well knew, a ſtrict inquiry would not ſerve their turn; and therefore tried, as long as they could, to ſtifle and conceal what had happened, in hopes it would gradually be forgotten. Undoubtedly their wiſer way had been, to have owned the truth, and yielded to it. But they were too wicked to be wiſe: and ſo contrived only to be cunning. Our Saviour had declared in ſtrong terms againſt them: they had proceeded to the laſt extremities againſt him. Therefore, beſides their ſpeculative prejudices; if he prevailed, all their authority, they ſaw, was utterly gone; and their perſons, they probably imagined, were not ſafe. So that, hardened as they were, and perſuaded it was too late to retreat; laying new evidence before them would only have increaſed their guilt in reſiſting it: they would have believed nothing they could help; they would have acknowledged nothing at all; but, if need had required, averred the direct contrary to what their own eyes had beheld. Probably indeed they were not all profligate alike: ſome of them would have ſubmitted to our Saviour, if they had ſeen him: but how do we know, that the ſame perſons did not, upon the teſtimony of others ſeeing him? For they, whom any proof would convince, might very well be convinced by ſuch proof, as that was: and we are expreſsly told, that a *great company of the prieſts were obedient to the faith*[*]: whoſe conviction, and that of thouſands more, at *Jeruſalem* itſelf, ſo very ſoon after, againſt their former deep-rooted perſuaſion, and preſent intereſt, is a ſtrong confirmation of the fact aſſerted by thoſe, who were witneſſes: and, on the whole, may be full as ſatisfactory, as if they had been witneſſes themſelves.

[*] Acts vi. 7.

But ſuppoſing that our Saviour's appearance to them would have converted all the rulers: undoubtedly this would have had a great, perhaps a general effect, in that one nation. But every nation, and every ſucceeding age, was concerned equally in this matter: and what effect would it have had upon them? The *Romans* firſt, would have conſidered it as a *Jewiſh* fraud, concerted amongſt themſelves, to raiſe the credit of their own religion; and no more have regarded the miracles of the apoſtles amongſt their countrymen, in theſe circumſtances, than we do thoſe of the church of *Rome*, pretended to be wrought, where every one is either unwilling, or afraid, to detect them. The infidels of later days, who believe nothing of the other miracles which the Jews believe, would they have believed this, merely becauſe the Jews believed it? Since they cannot even now refrain from aſcribing our religion to policy and prieſt-craft, though all the Jewiſh politicians and prieſts were zealous againſt it to the utmoſt; what would they have ſaid, if both had been for it, on ſeeing Chriſt after his reſurrection? Undoubtedly, that they had feigned a difficulty of being brought over into what they had, in truth, originally contrived; and, by their art and authority, prevented the diſcoveries, that elſe might have been made; or huſhed up thoſe, that actually were made.

Nor would even this have been the worſt conſequence yet. Had both the rulers, and the people received him as the Meſſiah, on the evidence of his appearing a ſecond time alive: ſtill they would have received him, according to their own falſe notion of the Meſſiah, as a temporal prince; and been immediately up in arms to ſet him on the throne, whether he would or not. For when he had performed but one miracle that took with them: he found they were reſolved inſtantly to *make him king by force**; and he avoided it only by eſcaping from them. He might indeed, when he was riſen again, have plainly told them all their miſtake: but they would either have rejected him once more upon it, (and then, to what purpoſe had they ſeen him?) or they would have thought he meant ſomething different from what he ſeemed to ſay; as the diſciples did, when he very plainly foretold his own death. Even them he could never ſet thoroughly right in the article of his kingdom, ſo long

* John vi. 15.

long as he remained on earth: much leſs the people. They were uneaſy under their new maſters: they expected a deliverer: their expectations were juſt then at the height: and had he ſhewn himſelf amongſt them, and been acknowledged by them; what could have reſtrained them, but ſuch a power, as God never exerciſes over the wills of men; for it would deſtroy their freedom, and alter the whole conſtitution of the moral world? Therefore, inſtead of *appearing to all the people*, he did not let his diſciples preach him to any of the people, from his reſurrection till after his aſcenſion: for had the body of them been told, and believed, that the Meſſiah was riſen, and ſtill amongſt them; of courſe they would have been eager in ſeeking him; and what rumours and tumults would this have raiſed, and what muſt have been the conſequences? After this, if he had left them, and aſcended into heaven, the remedy had come too late: the ferment would have continued; and it is impoſſible to know, to what height it might have riſen.

But had the Jews been ever ſo quiet; ever ſo much convinced by our Saviour, that they ought to remain quiet: yet, when once the *Romans*, who muſt know their former notions of the *Meſſiah*, came to underſtand, that they all agreed that he was at laſt come; they would never have believed this calm to be any thing, but an artifice, to lull them aſleep, till matters were ripe for a general inſurrection. They would therefore have ſeized on the leading men immediately, called in their forces from the countries round, and required the whole nation to renounce their new king. Had they ſubmitted to this, there had been an end of chriſtianity amongſt them. Had they reſiſted, as in all probability they would: upon the *Romans* prevailing, what the chief prieſts apprehended had certainly come to paſs; they would have *taken away their place and nation**, and the whole would have been charged on the doctrine of Chriſt. If the Jews had prevailed; they would have imagined their ſucceſs a full proof, that the Meſſiah was yet virtually, though not corporally, amongſt them; and proceeded to extend his dominion as wide as they could: under which circumſtances, the goſpel, in a manner abſolutely contrary to its nature and genius, muſt have owed its progreſs, if it made any, to force, not perſuaſion; and ſo have been liable to the ſame

* John xi. 48.

ſame unanſwerable objection, that the religion of *Mahomet* is now.

Or laſtly, ſuppoſing what is in the higheſt degree unlikely, that neither the Jews had rebelled, nor the *Romans* ſuſpected them, but both had been made ſuch as they ought, by a public appearance of our Saviour after his reſurrection: undoubtedly this had been very happy for that age, and perhaps the next too: but what had been the caſe of diſtant ages? We, that live in the latter days ſhould, by theſe means, have loſt intirely all that ſtrong and neceſſary evidence, for the truth of his miracles and hiſtory, which ariſes now from the impoſſibility of his primitive diſciples having any motive to deceive men, in teaching a doctrine, for which they ſuffered, ſo patiently and cheerfully, perſecution and death. Chriſtianity would then, in all likelihood, have been conſidered as a ſuperſtructure of *Roman* policy, erected, by an artful emperor, on a piece of Jewiſh enthuſiaſm, which he found very commodious for bringing the world into good order; particularly into quiet ſubjection to its new maſter. And the meekneſs of ſpirit, which our religion enjoins, and the great ſtreſs it lays on obedience to the civil magiſtrate, would have been thought a demonſtration, that this, and nothing elſe, was the real truth. So that the whole would have ſeemed by this method a contrivance of man: whereas now it appears plainly the work of God; affording reaſonable evidence to good minds; preventing the harm, that muſt have followed, if bad ones, continuing ſuch, had joined with them; and turning that oppoſition, both of Jews and heathens, which threatened the ruin of the goſpel, into a proof of its truth, that will ſupport it for ever.

Theſe conſiderations are ſurely ſufficient to remove any doubts of ſerious and humble minds on this head: to convince objectors, that they do not always ſee to the bottom of what they venture to talk about very freely: and to make it probable, that, in other points, as well as the preſent, when they come to be thoroughly examined, *the fooliſhneſs of God* will always be found *wiſer than men**: which good purpoſes may ſurely juſtify dwelling, now and then, ſomewhat largely on a ſubject of leſs general and practical uſe. It is true, the bad conſequences, that might have attended our Saviour's public appearance

* 1 Cor. i. 25.

pearance after his death, are ſeveral of them only conjectural: but the good ones, imagined likely to flow from it, are ſo too: and ſtronger conjectures are very juſtly oppoſed to weaker. Nay were any, or ever ſo many, of the reaſons, alledged for his conduct in this reſpect, of no weight at all: yet who knows, what others there may ſtill remain in the endleſs treaſures of the divine wiſdom, to be diſcovered hereafter? And what hath ſo fallible and ſhort-ſighted a creature, as man, to do; but thankfully to receive whatever knowledge, be it more or leſs perfect, his Maker ſhall vouchſafe to give him; and apply himſelf with the utmoſt care, to act ſuitably to what he underſtands; inſtead of raiſing objections and cavils, out of every particular, that he is ignorant of? *For the ſecret things belong unto the Lord our God: but thoſe things, which are revealed, belong unto us, and to our children for ever; that we may do all the words of this law**.

Let us all therefore learn, not only to believe firmly in ſpeculation, that our Saviour is riſen again, but in the faith of his reſurrection to prepare for our own: earneſtly praying God, *to raiſe us from the death of ſin to the life of righteouſneſs; and diligently ſeeking thoſe things which are above, where Chriſt ſitteth at the right hand of God; that, when he ſhall appear, we alſo may appear with him in glory*†. After his crucifixion he appeared on earth only to a few: but the day is approaching, when, *behold, he cometh with clouds, and every eye ſhall ſee him, and they alſo which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth*, that rejected or diſobeyed him, *ſhall wail becauſe of him*‡: *and ſhall he puniſhed with everlaſting deſtruction from the preſence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power, when he ſhall come to be glorified in his ſaints, and to be admired in all them that believed the teſtimony of him in that day*§. *For the Lord ſhall deſcend from heaven with a ſhout, with the voice of the arch-angel and with the trump of God: and the dead in Chriſt ſhall riſe firſt; and they which are alive and remain ſhall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and ſo ſhall we be ever with the Lord*‖.

* Deut. xxix. 29. † Col. iii. 1. 4. ‡ Rev. i. 7.
§ 2 Theſſ. i. 9, 10. ‖ 1 Theſſ. iv. 15, 16, 17.

SER-

SERMON LXX.

MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL, THE AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST.

2 COR. v. 20.

Now then we are ambaſſadors for Chriſt, as though God did beſeech you by us; we pray you in Chriſt's ſtead, be ye reconciled to God.

THE miniſters of the goſpel ought ever to have in their minds the end of their office, that they may diligently uſe the right means to attain it: and the people under our care ſhould be no leſs attentive to it, in order to receive, by co-operating faithfully with us, the benefits intended to be conveyed to them through our hands. Now the nature of our commiſſion is ſet forth in the text: where you have

I. The character, in which we act, *ambaſſadors for Chriſt.*

II. The errand, on which we are ſent, to *pray men* that they would *be reconciled to God.*

I. Our character is that of *ambaſſadors for Chriſt*, which means *inſtead of* Chriſt, as the ſame word is tranſlated in the latter part of the verſe. God ſent his Son into the world, as the meſſenger of his covenant; the perſon, by whom he notified his gracious promiſes, and the conditions of them, to mankind. When he ceaſed to inſtruct them perſonally, his words to his apoſtles were, *as the Father hath ſent me, even ſo ſend I you* *. Nor did he ſend the twelve only, but gave to his church other paſtors and teachers alſo, *for the work of the miniſtry, for the edifying of his body, till we all come unto perfect men in Chriſt* †, and promiſed to be *with them alway, even unto the end of the world* ‡. Such therefore the apoſtles appointed in every city; deputed

* John xx. 21. † Eph. iv. 12, 13. ‡ Matth. xxviii. 20.

deputed them to *work the work of the Lord, as they themſelves did* *; directed ſome of theſe to appoint others †, as *feeders of the flock, under Chriſt the chief ſhepherd* ‡; required them to *exhort and rebuke with all authority* §, and commanded chriſtians *to ſubmit to them, as watchmen over their ſouls, who muſt give account* ¶.

God forbid, that you ſhould have cauſe to be alarmed at the higheſt of theſe claims. The ſame ſcripture on which they are founded, guards againſt it ſufficiently. As to temporal matters: our Saviour's *kingdom is not of this world* ‖, nor have his miniſters, as ſuch, any peculiar right to interfere in the affairs of it. *The Lord* indeed *hath ordained, that they who preach the goſpel, ſhould live of the goſpel* **. But what proviſion ſhould be made for that purpoſe, he hath left intirely to the conſcience and the prudence of men. Our authority of demanding even a maintenance from the unwilling, and certainly then the further privileges that any of us enjoy, are derived ſolely from the voluntary gift of the civil power. And as to ſpiritual concerns: the very apoſtles were bound to teach only what their maſter commanded. And they indeed could not miſtake any part of it: but we may; and therefore you are not obliged to believe implicitly what we affirm. So far ſtill as perſons are ſenſible, that they cannot determine for themſelves, they ſhould follow their eſtabliſhed guides, if they have reaſon to think them ſkilful and honeſt. But to all others we apply as St. *Paul* did: *I ſpeak as to wiſe men: judge ye what I ſay* ††.

Whatever appears true to any man by his own reaſon, or to any chriſtian by the word of God, he ought to obſerve, though no one remind him of it. And whatever any one elſe proved to him, though abſolutely unauthoriſed, he is bound to admit. But when God himſelf, knowing man's need and yet unwillingneſs to be taught, hath expreſly ordained a ſucceſſion of perſons to execute that employment: if either we neglect to give, or you to receive inſtruction, it is a highly aggravated contempt of his authority, and of his mercy. *We have* indeed *this treaſure in earthen veſſels* ‡‡: and too often add ſins to our infirmities,

* 1 Cor. xvi. 10. † 2 Tim. ii. 2. Tit. i. 5. ‡ 1 Pet. v. 2, 4.
§ Tit. ii, 5. ¶ Heb. xiii. 17. ‖ John xvii 36.
** 1 Cor. ix. 14. †† 1 Cor. x. 15. ‡‡ 2 Cor. iv. 7.

firmities, by which we diſhonour him we repreſent, and ſhall bring down ſevere puniſhment on our own heads. But ſtill, as in temporal ſocieties, officers, though bad and unfit men, muſt be duly obeyed, as far as their commiſſion extends, in reſpect to the ſupreme power, under which they act; ſo in the ſpiritual one of the church, when you hear the truths of religion from the worſt of us all, you are to receive them as the word of God, for ſuch indeed they are, not as the word of men. And a meſſage from him deſerves the utmoſt honour; let them, who bring it, deſerve what they will.

Are you then, careful to regard what we ſay the more, if there be reaſon to think well of us; but as little prejudiced againſt it as poſſible, if there be not: or do you ſlight the commands of your Maker, when they come by a perſon whom you do not eſteem, or barely do not like? But if you like him ever ſo well, attend on him ever ſo conſtantly, applaud him ever ſo highly, and ſtop there; you have done nothing. It is not entertainment, it is *the law*, that you are to *ſeek at his mouth: for he is the meſſenger of the Lord of Hoſts* *. You are to look beyond us, to the end of our miſſion: not to pay us any ſuch deference, even for that, as may endanger our humility, leſſen our uſefulneſs, and pervert us into inſtruments of harm inſtead of good; but only to excite in your minds, from a due veneration of him who ſends us, a due attention to what the text mentions.

II. The errand he ſends us upon. Were that merely to notify a doctrine ever ſo ſtrange, ſhort of palpable abſurdity, a command ever ſo difficult, a threatning ever ſo ſevere, you would be bound to receive it, on the authority of proper credentials, with the moſt ſubmiſſive reverence. But what is the meſſage, that his miniſters bring you from him? *Be ye reconciled to God.* Surely a moſt gracious, but at the ſame time a very alarming one. For you will ſay, are we enemies to him then? Why doubtleſs the expreſſion implies, that poſſibly we may. And it is our higheſt concern to inquire immediately, (if we have not done it) whether we be or not.

By nature we are children of wrath: involved in the mortality, to which our firſt parents were condemned; in the corruption, with which they tainted themſelves. We experience both.

* Mal. ii. 7. † Eph. ii. 3.

both. And God muſt conſider our bad inclinations, however we came by them, with diſlike as well as pity: and may juſtly leave us in this fallen eſtate, unleſs we make uſe of the proper means to be relieved from it. What care then have you taken in this reſpect? "*We have been by baptiſm regenerate and grafted into the body of Chriſt's church* *: and we have perſonally ratified ſince, the vow then made in our name." You have done well: and theſe things intitle you to aſſiſtance from above for amending yourſelves, and to eternal life on condition of your endeavouring it faithfully. But all men have broken this condition by actual ſin. What have you done then to renew your covenant? Have you lamented your failings, and redoubled your watchfulneſs: or have you tamely given way to irregular appetites and paſſions? Have you not indeed ſtriven to excuſe, to juſtify, to encourage, to make proviſion for them? ſometimes perhaps you have reſiſted them: but from what principle? From that of conſcience towards God: or of intereſt, convenience, reputation only? If the latter, they are no religious motives. If the former, have you reſiſted in all ſorts of temptations, and in the main ſucceſsfully? "No: we muſt own, we have commonly been overpowered; and are ſo ſtill." Why, in proportion as this is your caſe, both reaſon and ſcripture pronounce it a bad one: for *without holineſs*, habitual piety and virtue, *no man ſhall ſee the Lord* †. Are you then trying all methods to increaſe your ſtrength: or do you give up the conteſt; ſometimes perhaps a little grieved; but oftener ſecretly glad, that you have gotten ſo ſpecious a pretence, as that of your weakneſs, for living as you like?

But you will ſay, how are we to increaſe our ſtrength? partly, by repreſenting to yourſelves, ſeriouſly and frequently, the baſeneſs and the danger of ſinning againſt God; by avoiding reſolutely the things and the perſons, that incline you to it; by reading good books, and hearing good advice in public and private. Something of all this you have probably done: but whether near ſo much as you could, aſk your own hearts. Or ſuppoſing you have: there is one eſſential point wanting. Have you applied to your heavenly Father for his help? Scripture and experience prove, that *we are not ſufficient of ourſelves* ‡. Now he is completely able, he is intirely willing, he

* Office of baptiſm. † Heb. xii. 14. ‡ 2 Cor. iii. 5

hath expreſly promiſed, to aſſiſt us. But he juſtly expects, that we ſhould own our dependance on him, by aſking his aid. And if we are too proud, or too negligent for that, he leaves us to the conſequences. "Yes: but we have prayed, as well as endeavoured, and all to no purpoſe." But how have you prayed? Only as a matter of courſe perhaps, without much perſuaſion, that it would do you any great good; without inward penitence and humiliation; without attention and earneſtneſs: or however without due perſeverance. And what can you expect from ſuch prayers?

But ſuppoſing, that you are ſatisfied with yourſelves on theſe heads, what plea have you made to God for his pardon and help? "That of his infinite mercy." But his mercy flows to mankind in a particular channel. *God was in Chriſt reconciling the world to himſelf*, as the verſe before the text teaches. Have you then applied through him? perſons ignorant of him indeed cannot: and the judge of all will undoubtedly conſider their caſe with equity. But if you, to whom he is revealed, ſeek to be reconciled without him, it is reſolving not to be reconciled at all. "No: we have prayed in his name conſtantly." But hath it been with any inward ſenſe of what he hath done for you, and is to you; with any real faith and truſt in his atonement and grace, diſclaiming all merit of your own; with any fixed and active reſolution to *take his yoke upon you* *. and obſerve his appointments in order to attain his likeneſs? poſſibly you will plead, that ſuch faith and reſolution are not in your power: *they are the gift of God* †, as appears from ſcripture: and therefore it is none of our fault, if you have them not. But it is in your power to yield to *his ſpirit* when he *ſtrives with you* ‡, to dwell on his convictions of your ſins and your danger, to cheriſh deſires of what you want, to endeavour at what you are commanded, to uſe the means which the goſpel preſcribes. If you have done thus, go on to do it, and you will infallibly ſucceed. If not, this is the method, which, *as though God did beſeech you by us, we pray you in Chriſt's ſtead*, to take, that ye may *be reconciled to God*. Whilſt you neglect it, you can be no other than his enemies: and think with yourſelves, we beg you, in the next place, how joyleſs, how terrible a ſituation that muſt be.

He

* Matth. xi. 29. † Eph. ii. 8. ‡ Gen. vi. 3.

He is infinitely wiſe: and therefore knows what is beſt for us. He is infinitely good: and therefore his directions point it out to us. He is perfectly juſt and holy: and therefore loves right and abhors wrong behaviour. His power is irreſiſtible, and therefore he can reward or puniſh to the utmoſt: his veracity is unqueſtionable, and therefore he will reward or puniſh eternally. What can we then promiſe ourſelves by diſobedience to him: what may we not promiſe ourſelves by obedience? Our worldly enjoyments, at beſt, are low and uncertain; our ſufferings many and ſevere; our comforts and ſupports under them poor and few; a very great part of our time is ſpent meanly and contemptibly, if not inſipidly and tediouſly. What a ſituation is this, if we are to take it for our all, without God and without hope! We are ſtrangely apt indeed to flatter ourſelves daily with proſpects of this and that pleaſure and advantage ſoon to come. But if we look back, what very great and laſting ſatisfaction hath the higheſt and the happieſt of us ever had: and what better ground is there to expect any in the remainder of our days? Undoubtedly we have enough to be thankful for, and much more than we have deſerved. But is it enough to reſt in, and deſire nothing farther? Shall we feel ourſelves perſuaded, on cool reflection at the cloſe of life, that going round and round the circle of our preſent amuſements and purſuits, in the manner that we have done, and being diſappointed continually by every one of them in its turn, is all the good that a rational ſoul needs wiſh; eſpecially while heavenly and eternal bliſs lies within our view and within our reach? This would be a groveling way of thinking indeed. But ſuppoſe our days are cut ſhort in the middle, or the beginning: ſuppoſe our gratifications are peculiarly few; or our diſtreſſes peculiarly heavy: ſtill ſhall we aim at nothing better? At leaſt, ſhall we not guard againſt ſomething unſpeakably worſe? For conſider; God is our Maker and Lord: this intitles him to our faithful ſervice. He is our benefactor by all that he hath given, and all that he is ready to give us: this demands our moſt affectionate gratitude. And if we deny him either, he will and muſt ſhew to the whole creation which he governs, that they who ſin, ſhall, unleſs they apply for pardon in the manner directed by him, ſuffer in proportion. Now they do not ſuffer thus here: and therefore they will hereafter. Are you then contented, rather than be reconciled to God, beſides

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loſing the promiſe of his favour, to undergo, firſt the terrors, then the torments of his future diſpleaſure, ſuch as his word hath deſcribed them? Think a little of this. What ſhould induce you to it?

If love of ſenſual gratifications tempt you to diſobey him: irregular ones will almoſt always end, and commonly ſoon, even in preſent miſery. If worldly intereſt: both forbidden methods, and immoderate deſires of promoting it will entangle you in perplexities, diſquiet you with ſolicitude, and ſtain you with diſhonour: you will often miſs your aim, and never be long ſatisfied with obtaining it. If reſentment or any ſpecies of malevolence biaſs you, this is being habitually and exquiſitely wretched, only for the chance of an occaſional joy in miſchief, that will make you almoſt as hateful to man as to God. Or could any of theſe things afford you a delight ever ſo unmixed, how very quick is the whole ſcene of them paſſing away! Doth pride then rule within you, and repreſent ſubmiſſion to your Creator, as beneath you? But do you not obey and honour your earthly ſuperiors? Do you not expect your inferiors to ſhew every appointed, every cuſtomary mark of honour and obedience to you; and even an implicit compliance with your directions? Why then is not the author and abſolute diſpoſer of your being, worthy of the moſt unreſerved duty, the moſt reſpectful homage; and where is the meanneſs of paying it?

But you are apprehenſive perhaps of being deſpiſed and ridiculed for your piety and virtue. But ſhall you not be approved and applauded by the wiſe and good, by many of the bad themſelves, by the judge of all and his holy angels at the great day? But, it may be, you have doubts about religion: and therefore you do not ſet heartily to practiſe it. Seek for information properly then, and hearken to it fairly. Practiſe conſcientiouſly what you cannot doubt of: keep to the ſafer ſide, where you do doubt: make ſure, that no ſinful inclination prejudices you: be content, though you do not ſee every thing, if you ſee enough to direct your ſteps; and you will ſoon diſcern, which way is beſt to take. But you are afraid of not perſevering: or though you ſhould, of not ſucceeding. Try however at leaſt. Honeſt endeavours, if they do no more, will alleviate your guilt. But by continuing them, you muſt gain ſome ground: and ſhould you fall after that, and ſeem

to

to loſe it; you may riſe again, and learn ſkill from your defeats to obtain at laſt the victory. Uſing the preſcribed means, you have God's promiſe for it: and how ſmall ſoever your own ſtrength may be, his hath no bounds.

Why doubtleſs, you will ſay, he can do every thing; but you have been a great ſinner; and you know not how to think he will either help or even forgive you. And certain it is, that you have not deſerved it: nor can you, of yourſelf, be ſure of it. But, ſtill common reaſon, gives you ſome hope. You are frail: he is good: his forbearance is a degree of forgiveneſs. Repenting, confeſſing, ſtriving, muſt render your condition better, than a contrary behaviour would. How much indeed, he himſelf alone can tell. And therefore, if you want further encouragement, as well you may, look into his holy word. There he had granted *knowledge of ſalvation to his people, by the remiſſion of their ſins, through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the day-ſpring from on high hath viſited us, to give light to them that ſit in darkneſs and the ſhadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace* *. Nay our offended benefactor and lawgiver and judge, not only permits, but *beſeeches you to be reconciled.* Nor hath he ſent this requeſt by a common meſſenger, but by his only Son, *who had glory with him before the world was* †, *who in the beginning was with God, and was God* ‡. Nor hath he ſent him, barely to make a publication of it, from heaven, and return; but to take upon him our nature, bear the inconveniences of a low condition of life, ſuffer indignities, perſecution and death; to reconcile forgiving goodneſs with juſtice and wiſdom; to notify, to prove, to conquer prejudices againſt the bleſſed union of theſe attributes. Nor even, after all this, hath he left men to remember his gracious invitation, or forget it, as they pleaſe: but eſtabliſhed a perpetual ſucceſſion of perſons, authorized and commanded to repeat it, weekly and daily, in public and in private, to every age, every nation, every ſinner; and enforce it by the ſtrongeſt motives, that can affect the human heart; but eſpecially that moſt engaging one, which follows the text: *Be ye reconciled to God; for he hath made him to be ſin for us, who knew no ſin, that we might be made the righteouſneſs of God in him.*

So

* Luke i. 77, 78, 79. † John xvii. 5. ‡ John i. 1.

So aſtoniſhing a method, we may be ſure, had never been taken, had not God, who knows beſt, ſeen our caſe was too bad for leſs powerful remedies. And the goodneſs of our heavenly Father in appointing this, of his Son in ſubmitting to it, of his Holy Spirit in applying it to our diſeaſed hearts, is, as the apoſtle juſtly expreſſes himſelf, *a love that paſſeth knowledge**. That thus much ſhould be done for any offenders, is beyond all imagination: yet it is done for the very worſt. But then all this mercy is conditional: its final effect depends on ourſelves. And *how ſhall we eſcape, if we neglect ſo great ſalvation*, thus obtained for us: which *at firſt began to be ſpoken by the Lord, was confirmed by them that heard him*†; and is offered to you, and preſſed upon you continually by his miniſters, who act for him, repreſent him, and beſeech you in his ſtead? Every ſtep, taken for your recovery, aggravates your guilt, if it be taken in vain. And there remaineth no more ſacrifice for ſins‡, no other miniſtry of reconciliation§, if you omit to be reconciled by this.

"But, you will ſay, we hope we are at peace with God." If you hope it on good grounds, his name be praiſed. But what grounds have you? "We attend his worſhip: we live regular lives: few, if any, of our neighbours, better." But do you attend all the ordinances of his worſhip, and conſtantly; and, to the beſt of your power, with your minds, as well as bodies? Are your lives regular in every thing, and no wrong inclinations, either of fleſh or ſpirit, indulged? Think a while of this. What your neighbours are, you know but imperfectly; and it concerns you but little: both they and you ſhall be condemned, if you are not what you ought. Poſſibly enough you ſtand well in the eſtimation of men: but are you faultleſs in the eyes of God? Certainly not. For *in his ſight ſhall no man living be juſtified*‖. Every deed, every word, every thought, hath its failure and guilt belonging to it. Are you then convinced of your fallen and loſt condition, of the imperfection, the inſufficiency, the ſinfulneſs of what is beſt in you; deeply humble, on this account, before *the high and lofty one that inhabiteth eternity, whoſe name is Holy*¶; ſenſible of your need of his pardon and grace; thankful believers in

* Eph. iii. 19. † Heb. ii. 3. ‡ Heb. x. 26.
§ 2 Cor. v. 18. ‖ Pſ. cxliii. 2. ¶ Iſ. lvii. 15.

in the ſatisfaction of his Son, in the ſanctifying influences of his Spirit? Do you accordingly pray to him daily in private, from the bottom of your ſoul; examine diligently your outward behaviour, your inward movements of heart, as in his preſence; yield up yourſelves to his will, and make it your great aim to ſerve and pleaſe him: not only in acts of faith and devotion, (though indiſpenſable and moſt important duties) but in a conduct of benevolence and equity, of mildneſs, uſefulneſs and bounty to all your fellow-creatures; in lowlineſs of mind, in chaſtity, ſobriety and temperance? Have you conſidered well, not merely what your own very fallible, and perhaps very partial, reaſonings ſuggeſt to you, but what his word requires of you? Are you honeſtly careful to obſerve all its rules: and do you find produced in yourſelves by them, a ſpirit of love and duty to God; and a deſire, ſuperior to all others, of enjoying a ſpiritual happineſs for ever with him? What is the anſwer of your conſciences to theſe queſtions?

If an unfavourable one: do not diſpair, be it ever ſo much ſo: for we have an high prieſt, *able to ſave to the uttermoſt them that come to God by him**. But loſe not a moment's time: preſs home your convictions on your ſouls; beg his interceſſion, plead his merits, follow his directions, *acquaint yourſelves with him, and be at peace*†. If it be a doubtful anſwer: can you bear to continue in doubt concerning your great, your eternal intereſt; impatient as you are apt to be of uncertainty in very ſmall matters? That would be a bad ſign indeed. "But how ſhall we remove the doubt?" Not by perplexing yourſelves with gueſſes in the dark: but by removing the cauſe. Whatever you find amiſs, after praying to God for pardon and ſtrength, ſet immediately to amend; and in proportion to your progreſs, you will have the only true ground of comfort. For *hereby know we, that we know him, if we keep his commandments*‡. Whoever doth ſo, though imperfectly, yet ſincerely and humbly, hath nothing to fear: whoever doth not, hath nothing to hope. Strong feelings of joyful aſſurance may be given to the pious from above, as a preſent reward: and ſtrong feelings of vain preſumption may lead on the wicked, ſecure and triumphant, to their final deſtruction. Very reaſonable terrors, from conſciouſneſs of their guilt, may torment the bad beforehand: and very unreaſonable ones, from conſtitution, or the ſuggeſ-

* Heb. vii. 25. † Job xxii. 21. ‡ 1 John ii. 3.

tions of Satan, may aſſault the good. Therefore we are to judge of our condition by none of theſe things; but by the ſcripture rule, fairly interpreted: *Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doth righteouſneſs is righteous: he that committeth ſin, is of the devil**.

If then obedience to the goſpel is the principle, by which you deſignedly and habitually govern your lives: thank God for it, take comfort in it and be happy, whatever befalls you in this world. But ſtill remember, that every degree of ſin remaining is a degree of enmity remaining: and who hath not need *to be reconciled* more completely? St. *Paul* had already told the perſons, to whom he ſpeaks in the text, that *his hope of them was ſtedfaſt; knowing, that as they were partakers of the ſufferings of Chriſt, they ſhould be partakers of his conſolation alſo*†. But notwithſtanding this, he continues to beſeech them, *be ye reconciled to God.* If we ſee into ourſelves at all, the beſt of us muſt ſee, that there are many things in us, which we cannot approve. If we have any due ſenſe of his goodneſs to us, and of love to him in return: we ſhall earneſtly wiſh and labour to be more pleaſing to him, and more like him. If we have any experience of what is true happineſs here, or any ambition of a high rank in happineſs hereafter, we ſhall ſurely reflect, that both depend on our improvements in pure religion and genuine virtue. If we have any right apprehenſion of the dangers, that ſurround us, we muſt foreſee, that unleſs we preſs forward, we ſhall be driven back and fall: but the further we advance, on the ſurer ground we ſhall ſtand. And if we have any juſt zeal for the glory of our bleſſed Redeemer; we ſhall deeply lament, that our failings have ſo frequently given others occaſion to *blaſpheme that worthy name, whereby we are called*‡; and ſhall uſe our utmoſt endeavours to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things§: which that we may accordingly, he of his infinite mercy grant: to whom be all honour and praiſe, now and for ever. *Amen.*

* John iii. 7, 8. † 2 Cor. i. 7.
‡ James ii. 7. § Tit. ii. 10.

SER.

SERMON LXXI.

The Present Disadvantages, Shamefulness, and Punishment of a Wicked Life.

Rom. vi. 21.

What fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

THE first resolution, which every one should take in the conduct of life, is to deliberate seriously, as soon as he becomes capable of it, by what rule his future behaviour shall be formed. And one principal cause of the follies, which men commit, and the miseries into which they fall, is their strange neglect of this obvious duty: a duty impossible to be controverted; for it is only inquiring what will be most for our interest.

And yet a very great part of mankind never once think of any certain rule at all for their conduct; but go on at random, indulging the present inclination, which way soever it leads, and how often soever it may vary: and thus fill up a life of thoughtless inconsistency, aiming at no one end beyond pleasing themselves any how for the time, let what will follow. But surely a very little reflection might shew, that what pleases us now, may ruin us ere long, perhaps very soon: that different courses of life have very different consequences, highly deserving our attention: and in particular, that those of a virtuous and a vicious life differ so extremely, that we ought not to continue an hour undetermined, longer than we must, which we shall pursue. What the prophet *Elijah* said to the *Israelites* belongs equally to all of this unsettled character: *How long halt ye between two opinions? If*

*the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him**. Why this perpetual wavering and fluctuation, about the firſt thing, that you ought to fix; the one point, on which all depends! If a profane and immoral conduct will produce and ſecure happineſs to you, follow profaneneſs and immorality, *yield your members as inſtruments of unrighteouſneſs unto ſin*†. But if religion and virtue be the means of true and laſting ſelf-enjoyment, let religion and virtue be your care, and *yield yourſelves ſervants of righteouſneſs unto God*‡. *Chuſe ye therefore this day, whom ye will ſerve*§.

And there are indeed multitudes, that would give ſufficient proofs of having made a choice, and a very ill one, if running headlong into wickedneſs merited the name of chuſing it. But rational choice preſuppoſes due conſideration: whereas theſe poor wretches have ſuffered themſelves to be led on blindfold, by example and cuſtom, unexamined appearances and ungoverned inclinations, with no more notion of inquiring, whether they are in the right road, than if there were no other at all. Or if ever they have deliberated, they have done it unfairly or ſuperficially; or upon ſome one point of their behaviour, not the whole; and perhaps, only which of two interfering deſires, both of them wrong, they ſhould gratify. But ſurely the firſt diviſion of human conduct is into religious and irreligious. Which of theſe two we ought to prefer, is the queſtion that we are to begin with: and it will be time enough to conſider, in what way we ſhall be bad, after we have examined, whether it is not our wiſdom to be good.

In this moſt important inquiry, an imperfect view of things may eaſily deceive us, and doth in fact deceive the generality of mankind. We muſt therefore be very careful to lay before ourſelves the whole of what is to be expected, hoped or feared. But indeed both our own paſſions and appetites, and the opinions and practices of the world, will be ſure to remind us abundantly of what makes in favour of prohibited indulgences. And conſequently in order to keep our judgement upright, we muſt be diligent in repreſenting to ourſelves what makes againſt them. And we cannot poſſibly do it in a better method, than that of the apoſtle, addreſſing himſelf to the *Roman* converts:

* 1 Kings xviii. 21.
† Rom. vi. 13.
‡ Rom. vi. 13, 19.
§ Joſh. xxiv. 15.

verts: *What fruit had ye then in thoſe things, whereof ye are now aſhamed? for the end of thoſe things is death.*

In theſe words is propoſed to our ſerious thoughts,

I. The preſent unprofitableneſs of ſin.

II. The ſhamefulneſs of it.

III. The puniſhment, which awaits it.

I ſhall be able in this diſcourſe to conſider only the firſt point, the unprofitableneſs of ſin, even at preſent. And for this he appeals to the hearts and conſciences of thoſe, with whom he argues: *what fruit had ye then in thoſe things?* well knowing they muſt own, that upon trial they had found none: a confeſſion, which very few have ever failed to make, when after a life, ſpent in wickedneſs, they came to reflect coolly, what real advantage they had gained by it on the upſhot. The language of thoſe, who will be prevailed on to balance the great account, is almoſt univerſally the ſame, which *Elihu* in *Job* aſcribes to the penitent, *I have ſinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not**. Some may imagine this to ariſe from a diſpoſition, which we have, to be diſcontented; and to think, after a while, any other way better, than that which we have choſen. But how comes it to paſs then, that no pious and virtuous man was ever known, calmly and deliberately, to make the ſame declaration concerning his manner of life? Nothing hath been more common in all ages, than for the wicked to acknowledge their miſtakes and their miſery, and exhort others to take warning by them. But the good, as ſoon as ever they had time to become habitually ſuch, have always pronounced themſelves eaſy and happy; and thought it the greateſt kindneſs, that they could do to thoſe, whom they loved the moſt tenderly, to beg they would tread in their ſteps. Now, in other caſes, we look on the agreeing teſtimony of thoſe who have experienced what they affirm, as being deciſive. Why then ſhould we diſtruſt them in this alone; and obſtinately inſiſt upon trying what they forewarn us aloud will be fatal? Indeed have not ſome of us tried much too far already? And for God's ſake, let us aſk ourſelves, what fruit we have had from it, and what we are likely to have, in caſe we proceed further.

But

* Job xxxiii. 27.

But if we will reckon the experience of others incompetent, and our own imperfect, let us conſider the natural tendency of ſin. Should we be unable to diſcover from thence, why it ſhould do us harm, we may doubt whether it doth the harm, that we are told, or will go on to do the harm, that we have hitherto felt from it: but if we ſee, that in its nature it muſt be unprofitable and hurtful, as well as learn from the experience of others and our own that it is ſo, then ſurely nothing will be wanting to convince us.

Now we all know, however apt we are to forget it, that reaſon is the principal part of our frame: thence therefore, if we are made with any wiſdom, we muſt expect the principal part of our happineſs: and yet every ſort of wickedneſs is abſolutely contradictory to reaſon. Undutifulneſs to an almighty ſuperior, and ingratitude to a gracious benefactor, ſuch as God is; unkindneſs to our relations and friends, hard-heartedneſs to perſons in diſtreſs, injuſtice or implacability to any one, or uſeleſſneſs to thoſe, who are uſeful to us: degrading ourſelves below the rank of our nature, and living only or chiefly to brutal appetites, though we are men; or to trifling pleaſures, though we have capacities for much worthier employments: all theſe things are evidently unreaſonable and unfit, as any thing can be. And what advantage or what quiet can we hope in diſobeying that principle, which was plainly deſigned to rule us?

Beſides, our affections were doubtleſs originally intended to accord with reaſon: and, though much diſordered by the fall of our firſt parents, yet in a conſiderable meaſure they do ſo ſtill. Now can we queſtion, but that diſorder is the cauſe of miſery to us here? And if ſo, the greater we make it by acts of ſin, the greater our miſery will be; and the more we rectify it by acts of piety and virtue, the nearer we ſhall return to our natural ſtate, in which alone every thing flouriſhes and doth well. Right reaſon and right affection were the primitive rules, that God gave man to live by: and how can we fancy that we ſhall ever find our account in putting a force upon them, and wreſting ourſelves from under their government!

But a farther and very material conſideration is, that all kinds of wickedneſs manifeſtly tend to deſtroy the good order, proſperity and peace, of kingdoms, of communities, of families; and

and that indeed the injuries which men do to one another by tranſgreſſing the laws of God make up the heavieſt and bittereſt part of the ſufferings of life. Now what is contrary to the intereſt of all in general, muſt be in ſome degree prejudicial to that of every one in particular: and each perſon who is guilty of it, *teaches* others *an evil leſſon againſt himſelf**. The vicious, even thoſe who value themſelves the moſt on their good nature, are one way or another, perhaps many ways, perpetually doing miſchief. They are indeed enemies, as far as their influence reaches, to the whole ſociety of mankind. It is the general intereſt of the world to oppoſe and diſcourage them. It is the particular buſineſs of government to reſtrain and puniſh them. All that ſuffer conſiderably by them, will be ſure to abominate them: and moſt others will ſcorn and deſpiſe them. Now it is a dreadful evil to loſe a bleſſing ſo juſtly dear to men, as that of a good name and reputation. To be abhorred, or even ſuſpected and diſtruſted, by thoſe amongſt whom we live, is hardly ſupportable: to be merely diſliked and diſapproved, is very mortifying. Yet one or other of theſe they muſt expect: not only from the religious and worthy, whoſe eſteem ought to be and ever will be chiefly deſired, but alſo from their fellow-ſinners; who conſtantly condemn the ſins, which they do not practiſe, and often thoſe which they do. Sometimes indeed ſome of them may join in applauding their common follies: but that makes them never the leſs follies. Sometimes, for private ends, perſons may flatter for a while ſuch as they inwardly hold in deriſion of deteſtation. But this kind of court never doth good to thoſe who receive it: nor is it able to hinder but that on the whole miſchievous vices will produce hatred, and imprudent ones contempt. And what fruit can men reap from ſuch things?

But hitherto you have heard proofs only of the common ill effects of all ſins: let us now conſider the ſeveral ſorts, and the fruits of each of them, ſeparately.

Some of our bad inclinations are neceſſarily, in the very feeling of them, uneaſy and painful: as envy, hatred and anger. Others are ſo at leaſt in their immediate conſequences: diſquieting our minds with weariſome and endleſs purſuits, of what we ſhall either not obtain, or not keep, or be little or nothing

* Eccluſ ix. 1.

nothing the better for, if we do. Such is the exorbitant thirſt of power and rank and wealth; always reſtleſs and diſſatisfied, always full of diſcontents and diſappointments. Again, ſome of them prompt us to overvalue ourſelves often to our great damage; and at the ſame time provoke others to undervalue us; as do pride and vanity. Some, if they are accompanied with no pain, yet can make no pretence to giving any pleaſure: as profaneneſs. And the ſeeming pleaſure of ſome others is in reality ſcarce more than getting rid of a torment, which a good mind would never have experienced. Such, and no better, is the joy of revenge. Nay, where criminal gratifications are the moſt agreeable, as in ſenſual indulgences; beſides that they are uſually very fleeting and ſhort-lived, perhaps an equal, perhaps a ſuperior degree of them upon the whole, might by the means of prudence have been obtained conſiſtently with virtue: which doth not forbid the regular and ſeaſonable and temperate ſatisfaction of any deſire, but only reſtrains us within due and ſafe bounds: whereas the vicious, affecting immoderate and prohibited liberties, are indeed the unhappieſt ſlaves to their own luſts and fancies; eſpecially when by a habit of yielding to them, they have taught them to claim, with abſolute authority, the moſt pernicious compliances. And in this ſituation, how much inward anguiſh muſt there often lie hid under the gayeſt ſhews of mirth and amuſement; whether the ſoul be oppreſſed by the ſettled tyranny of a ſingle paſſion, or torn in pieces by the rage of oppoſite ones, contending for maſtery *! Then, what deſtructive effects theſe ſins of this kind have on the healths and fortunes of their votaries, diſqualifying them, often in the beginning of life, for the enjoyment of every thing in which they placed the happineſs of it, and expoſing them to great diſtreſſes and ſufferings throughout the remainder, is much too well known to need enlarging on, though much leſs conſidered, than its importance requires.

But too many imagine, that, whatever others do, they ſhall ſin with diſcretion: gratify their inclinations, and carry on their deſigns

* Sic diſtrahuntur in contrarias partes impotentium cupiditates; cum huic obſecutus ſis, illi eſt repugnandum. Cic. Tuſc. Diſp. l. 5. §. 20. Intus etiam in animis incluſæ cupiditates inter ſe diſſident atque diſcordant; ex quo vitam amariſſimam neceſſe eſt effici. Cic. de Fin. l. 1. §. 13. Comp. §. 18.

deſigns, of whatever ſort they be, with ſo much art, as to avoid all manner of bad conſequences. But why do they imagine ſo? It is hard enough to govern our paſſions before they have been accuſtomed to indulgence. But firſt to indulge them, and then think to ſtop where we pleaſe, is a ſcheme that always hath deceived, and always will deceive, thoſe who are weak enough to rely upon it. Virtuous behaviour hath plain and firm ground to ſtand upon: but if once we quit our ſure footing there, the declivity is endleſs, the tendency downwards will increaſe every moment, and how far we may be carried, God only knows. They have gone the moſt fatal lengths in ſin, reſolved at firſt, as much as you can do, to proceed cautiouſly: never once queſtioning but they could keep their reſolution, till it was too late. And it may very ſoon be too late with any of us. For not only the habit of every vice leads men farther and farther in it, but the moſt different vices are ſtrangely connected with each other: and he who intended to allow himſelf in but one ſeemingly harmleſs tranſgreſſion, is drawn by it gradually, or hurried unawares, into numbers of worſe, that end in his ruin; the grace of God being juſtly withdrawn from ſuch preſumptuous offenders.

But it will be objected, that however unprofitable ſome ſins may be, yet others are peculiarly calculated for profit; as covetouſneſs, with its retainers, fraud and extortion: which the *wiſe in their generation* * would never practiſe, unleſs they found the advantage of them, as they viſibly do. Now if by advantage be meant, what ſhould be meant, real happineſs, they viſibly do not. Covetouſneſs is peculiarly a miſerable paſſion: and diſtinguiſhed by that very name of *miſerable* in common ſpeech. The temper itſelf is full of fears and cares, alarms and ſuſpicions. Then, in order to gratify it, every benevolent, if not every honeſt, diſpoſition of our hearts muſt be contradicted; and when it riſes to a certain height, every innocent enjoyment of life, that carries the leaſt expence with it, muſt either be renounced, or grudged while it is tolerated. But without running to ſuch extremes, to all avaricious minds the ſmalleſt loſſes will be heavy misfortunes; and the greateſt gains will want ſomething of being ſo great as they ſhould have been. They muſt undergo the pain of envying every one that is in circum-

* Luke xvi. 8.

ſtances above them: they muſt expect at the ſame time the ill-will of every one beneath them: and after all, their unnatural cravings, far from being appeaſed, will increaſe much faſter, than their poſſeſſions; and the more eagerly they endeavour to quench their thirſt, the more fiercely it will return upon them. Or let us ſuppoſe, if you will, the deſire of gain to be indulged, not with the abſurd view of hoarding to no purpoſe and no end; but for the delight of ſatisfying more natural inclinations by the means of great wealth: yet, if theſe be moderate and reaſonable, they may be very competently ſatisfied without it; and, if they be exceſſive, you have ſeen already that they are hurtful, and therefore ought not to have proviſion made for them.

If then covetouſneſs of both ſorts be unwiſe; fraud and extortion, which only ſerve as inſtruments of covetouſneſs, cannot be beneficial. But on the contrary, they have peculiar diſadvantages belonging to them. There are indeed inſtances, too frequently, of riches acquired by indirect methods: but ſtill diſhoneſty hath ruined many more than it hath raiſed: and the ruin of ſuch is never pitied, and ſeldom retrieved. Fair dealing is the plain path, which God hath marked out for mankind to go in: and they who think to be too cunning for their Maker, are few of them able to depart from it without injuring themſelves even now, as much or more than they do others. One half of the contrivance and circumſpection, that men are obliged to in a knaviſh way, would have enabled them to thrive very well in an honeſt one, without the hatred and curſe of all around them, without the perpetual dread of being detected, and the loſs they muſt ſuffer, whenever that happens, (which ſeldom fails,) both by others declining to have any further concern with them, and perhaps by the penalties which the law will inflict on them. Or let them eſcape theſe dangers ever ſo well; yet how often doth it fall out, that either what they have acquired wickedly, they ſquander fooliſhly, it may be wickedly too, and ſo nothing remains with them but the guilt of both; or, at leaſt, poſterity, for whoſe ſake chiefly they have taken theſe unrighteous pains, diſſipate in a few years what they have been accumulating in many; and very poſſibly give them the torment, which they have well deſerved, of ſhewing them beforehand, that they will diſſipate it! And thus is the

ſcripture

ſcripture warning verified: *An inheritance may be gotten haſtily at the beginning; but the end thereof ſhall not be bleſſed* *.

You ſee then how many and great the preſent and worldly inconveniences of wickedneſs are; and I have dwelt on them ſo largely, becauſe preſent and worldly things are apt to affect us ſo much. Yet ſtill it muſt be acknowledged, that all of them do not follow conſtantly, and that ſometimes conſiderable advantages in appearance may be gained by tranſgreſſing our duty. But perhaps even then as conſiderable ones of the ſame kind may be loſt by it; for men cannot have the benefit of two oppoſite characters and behaviours at the ſame time. Or, if every thing ſhould happen to their wiſh, the probability notwithſtanding lay greatly on the other ſide: the contrary was to have been expected: and therefore no wiſe perſon would ever run the hazard, though now and then ſome one may chance to find his account in it.

But indeed we are as yet only in the firſt article of the account; and have by no means completed that. Not only the poſitive outward evils, that wickedneſs brings upon us, but the inward ſatisfactions and comforts of which it deprives us, muſt be taken in. Sincerity of good will, openneſs of confidence, faithfulneſs of friendſhip, tenderneſs of affection, conſciouſneſs of merited eſteem, are the ſweeteſt ingredients in human life. Now all theſe, with all the complacency and joy of heart that flows from them, the wicked, by their ambitious, their covetous, their ſenſual purſuits, by their reſentments, their falſehoods, their neglects, their provocations, exclude themſelves from enjoying: wear out from their hearts by degrees the moſt delightful ſenſibilities of which human nature is capable; and leave nothing there, but the wretched feelings of hating or diſregarding others, and being hated or diſregarded by them. Then, in the various afflictions and croſſes of life, in decaying health, ſinking ſpirits, and declining age, a good man hath many ſupports, from the innocence and integrity of his paſt life, from the love and gratitude of his friends, from the firm belief of a wiſe and kind providence, continually watching over him. But none of theſe conſolations belong to a wicked man, when he is in the ſame condition: the things in which he placed his whole happineſs have failed him and are gone; the companions

* Prov. xx. 21.

of his proſperity deſert him, the world rejoices over him, heaven frowns upon him, and his own heart condemns him.

But this would lead me to the ſecond head, the ſhame attending ſin. After that, there remains a third, of the future puniſhment awaiting it. Both theſe, God willing, ſhall be diſtinctly ſet before you: and then you will ſee in the fulleſt light, whatever may ſeem wanting to the evidence of it now, that *the knowledge of wickedneſs is not wiſdom; neither at any time the counſel of ſinners, prudence* *.

God grant we may all be convinced of this while it will do us good! To him, with his Son and bleſſed Spirit, be all honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

* Eccluſ xix. 22.

SER.

SERMON LXXII.

The Present Disadvantages, Shamefulness, and Punishment of a Wicked Life.

Rom. vi, 21.

What fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

IN discourſing on theſe words, I have propoſed to lay before you,

I. The preſent diſadvantages of a wicked life.

II. The ſhamefulneſs of it.

III. The puniſhment, which awaits it hereafter.

The firſt of theſe heads I have finiſhed: and ſhewn, from the teſtimony of the wicked themſelves, from the inconſiſtence of all ſin with the principles of our reaſon, from its repugnancy to the original dictates of our affections, from its pernicious influence on every branch of human ſociety, that it muſt in general produce unſpeakable harm to us. Then I proceeded to prove, in relation to ſeveral ſins more particularly, that ſome of them are in their very nature painful; and that the pleaſures, which others promiſe, are either falſe and imaginary, or inconſiderable and ſhort-lived, or, to all the purpoſes of real happineſs, equally attainable, for the moſt part, by virtuous means: but that the evils, which they bring on, are various and great, and often ſpeedy, and ſeldom avoided by the utmoſt care: that even thoſe ſins which may ſeem peculiarly calculated for profit and advantage, are in truth as unprofitable and hurtful as the reſt: and that laſtly, beſides leading men into the moſt grievous inconveniences and ſufferings, wickedneſs deprives them of the moſt

moſt valuable even of their worldly enjoyments, comforts, and ſupports.

Were we therefore only to conſider, how unhappily it affects all the common and acknowledged ingredients of our preſent well-being, a courſe of ſin, on ſtating the account merely thus, would be found, though perhaps not without exceptions, yet with but few exceptions, and ſuch as no one could rationally expect in his own favour, a courſe of folly: as accordingly we ſee it conſtantly repreſented, even with reſpect to this world, not only by the ſacred writers, but the greateſt and ableſt of heathens themſelves; but ſuch as had ſome belief of a future ſtate, and ſuch as had none.

But for our fuller ſatisfaction in a point of this moment, let us proceed farther to conſider,

II. The ſhamefulneſs of it.

Now ſhame is of two ſorts: ariſing from a conſciouſneſs of having acted, either fooliſhly againſt our intereſt, or wickedly againſt our duty. I begin with the firſt.

An immoral life being ſo full of imprudence and ſuffering as you have ſeen it is, many and ſevere reflections on their own miſtaken choice muſt unavoidably torture the minds of the vicious from time to time, be they ever ſo induſtrious to baniſh them. The abſurdity of the things, which they ſay and do in the madneſs of their debauches; the contemptibleneſs of their condition, while they languiſh under the effects of them: the miſerable wages, which they receive for their hard ſervitude to low appetites; the meanneſs of going on with what they have a thouſand times reſolved to leave off; the wretched ſhifts, that they muſt uſe to ſupport the expences of their irregularities; the embarraſſments into which the moſt circumſpect of them are continually running by unfair practices; the grievous diſappointments, which the wiſeſt of them experience, from what promiſed, as they imagined, the trueſt and higheſt ſatisfaction; the extraordinary pains which they have taken, to be never the happier, and are taking ſtill, only to be farther from their end than ever: theſe are conſiderations, that will find a ſeaſon to make their way both into the gayeſt and the buſieſt minds, and often embitter the reliſh of their pleaſures and their proſperity, even while they are at the height.

But when any remarkable check hath been given to the ſinner in his courſe; when the iniquities of the fraudulent

have

have expoſed him to diſgrace and loſs, or the extravagances of the ſpendthrift reduced him to indigence, when the ſtrength and ſpirits of the diſſolute are worn out, or advancing years have brought on ſatiety and diſguſt: then, with full leiſure for thinking of their doings, and perhaps inability for thinking of any thing elſe, to ſee that they have ſcorned the dictates of reaſon and the counſels of the diſcreet and good, only to become miſerable: what confuſion muſt they feel from it: they, who applauded ſo highly the wiſdom of their own way of life, as the only one worth living for, and ridiculed with ſuch unſpeakable contempt the ſilly ſcruples of the poor virtuous man, whoſe conduct they now find ſo vaſtly preferable to their own!

But further: this inward ſelf-diſpleaſure and diſlike will, in ſuch caſes, be greatly aggravated by the cenſure and upbraiding of the world, redoubled upon them when they can bear it leaſt. Sinners in diſtreſs are uſually deſpiſed and condemned by their very tempters, and partners in ſin. All, whom they have injured, will claim a right to inſult them. Thoſe, to whom they apply for aſſiſtance or comfort, will have a ſpecious plea for diſregarding and rejecting them. The generality will be eager to ſhew the ſuperiority, ſome of their goodneſs, and ſome of their prudence, by reproaching them bitterly for their want of both. Even the beſt and beſt-natured perſons, while they mourn over them, muſt remind them how unwiſe they have been; and on proper occaſions mention them as warning to others. *Lo, this is the man, that made not God his ſtrength, but ſtrengthened himſelf in his wickedneſs**. Now think, I beg you, what muſt their feelings, amidſt all this, be!

But, beſides the ſhame of folly, they have a much worſe kind to undergo, that of guilt, from the conſciouſneſs, that their behaviour hath been wrong and unworthy and of ill deſert. For with what indifference ſoever many may affect to ſpeak of this, all have at times, a ſenſe of it extremely acute. Let any one aſk his heart, what it thinks, when ſeriouſly diſpoſed, of ingratitude for the being, which God hath beſtowed on us, and the bleſſings, preſent and future, which he hath provided for us: of wilful and contemptuous diſobedience to laws, ſo reaſonable and beneficial, as he hath enjoined us; ſo ſcornfully

* Pſal. lii. 7.

fully ſlighting ſuch offers of pardon and acceptance, as our bleſſed Redeemer hath purchaſed for us by his death, and made us in his goſpel; of neglecting the means appointed for our ſpiritual improvement, quenching the inward ſuggeſtions of our heavenly monitor, and *doing deſpite unto the ſpirit of grace*[*]. Let any one reflect what his deliberate ſentiments are of falſehood and treachery, of oppreſſion and violence, of cruelty and implacability, of hard-heartedneſs and inſenſibility; what impreſſions it naturally makes on him to ſee innocence betrayed to ruin under pretence of tender affection, the peace and honour of families violated, or the due order of ſociety deſtroyed, to gratify a lewd appetite; to ſee a rational creature degrade himſelf below a beaſt by intemperance, and abandon thoſe to diſtreſs, for whom he is bound by the ſtrongeſt ties to make proviſion. How do theſe things look in others? How would they look to you, if you were the ſufferer by them? Only remember therefore, that they are juſt the ſame, when you are the doer of them; and then ſay, if wickedneſs of every kind doth not abound in guilt, and merit ſevere puniſhment.

Indeed hath not every ſinner, eſpecially at his firſt entrance into ſin, had powerful convictions of this truth: found that there were perſons, whom he could not ſee without confuſion and diſmay; actions, which he could not think of, without hating himſelf? And what can make any one amends for being in ſuch circumſtances? He may hope indeed, that in time he ſhall get rid of theſe troubleſome ſenſations; and may perſuade himſelf, that afterwards he ſhall be in as good a condition, as if there were no ground for them. But ſurely moſt abandoned muſt they be, who can delight in ſuch an imagination: who having once known what ſhame is, can be content to live on in a courſe of ſhameful actions in hopes of loſing by degrees the perception of which are ſo, and which otherwiſe. What ſhould we think of a perſon, who after diſcerning clearly the deſpicableneſs of folly, ſhould conſent to be changed into an idiot, merely that he might play the fool without reſtraint from within; and ſhould fancy it to be comfort enough, that then he ſhould not know the difference? Yet this man would be chiefly an object of pity: but the others, of utter deteſtation. And even this ignominious hope of theirs will certainly deceive

[*] Heb. x. 29.

ceive them. For the faculty of moral reflection, conſcience, is planted in us by our Maker for this very purpoſe, that we may approve or condemn ourſelves, according as we act well or ill; and if our underſtandings be at all cultivated by education, it uſually gains vigour enough to anſwer the purpoſe, and cannot eaſily be rooted out. Whether we will be the better for its admonitions is in our own power; elſe we ſhould not be free agents: but feel them we muſt. And the many contrivances, which the vicious uſe to lay the ſenſe of their vileneſs aſleep, and the deſperate reſolutions which they frequently take when they cannot do it, are abundant proofs, how ſharp the pain of guilty reflection may become.

Some indeed profligately boaſt of having got over it: and a few perhaps may; though not near ſo many, as will at times pretend they have. But what long and tormenting ſtruggles muſt they probably have experienced firſt: and in how deplorable a ſtate muſt the benumbing and ſtupifying of ſo important a principle of their nature have left them! The loſs of bodily feeling and motion is but a faint image of it, and after all no one can be ſecure, that ſomething may not ſtill awaken this dormant power, when he leaſt expects it. Some great and mortifying diſappointment, ſome remarkable ſtroke of God's providence, ſome alarming paſſage in his word, ſome affecting diſcourſe from the pulpit, ſome experimental confeſſion of a fellow ſinner, nay merely ſome inſtantaneous turn in his mind, for which it is impoſſible to account, may preſent on a ſudden a moſt tremendous view of himſelf to his own eyes: or ſome other perſon may be induced or provoked to lay his crimes in order before his face, perhaps before the world. And then, whatever aſcendant he may have gained over his conſcience before, impoſing on it with ſpecious colours, or calling off its attention from his paſt behaviour, yet then he will be forced to behold things as they are; and appear not only wretched and guilty to himſelf, but an object of abhorrence to others. Now general bad opinion is hard enough to be borne, even when the mind is ſupported by innocence: but when infamy is accompanied with the conviction of deſerving it, almoſt intolerable. For the feeling is not only dreadful in itſelf, but fills the ſoul with endleſs jealouſies and ſuſpicions, diſtracting horrors and fears, even of dangers the leaſt probable. *Wickedneſs, condemned by her own witneſs, is very timorous: and*

*being preſſed with conſcience, always forecaſteth grievous things**. *The wicked are like the troubled ſea, when it cannot reſt, whoſe waters caſt up mire and dirt: There is no peace, ſaith my God, to the wicked*†. Whoſe notice ſoever they eſcape, the very worſt, the baſeſt of their deeds lie conſtantly open to his view: and what *ſhame of face*‡ and dread of heart muſt that awful recollection excite!

Sometimes indeed theſe inward pangs drive men, as it was intended they ſhould, to deep humiliation, to prayer for pardon, to laying hold on God's mercy through the merits of Chriſt, to zealous amendment, through the aid of the holy Spirit. And then it is doubtleſs happy to have felt them; but by no means to have committed the iniquity, that cauſed them: for an equally devout application to heaven with a greater degree of innocence, would have been ſtill more graciouſly received, and more bountifully rewarded: unleſs they to whom *many ſins are forgiven, love much*§, and work diligently in proportion; which many unqueſtionably have done: but who can promiſe himſelf that he ſhall do it, and ſhall be allowed to experienced the joy of doing it? On the contrary, as the ſelf-condemnation, which produced this mighty change muſt have been extremely painful during the accompliſhment of it; ſo afterwards, and perhaps long afterwards, it may prove a burthen heavy enough to convince a very ſincere convert, that an early and continued obedience would have been much preferable to his trueſt repentance. And therefore, as moſt ſinners endeavour to quiet themſelves with a proſpect of repenting ſome time or another, they ought moſt ſeriouſly to conſider, what remorſe and dejection they are treaſuring up for themſelves in the mean while, though they ſhould do at laſt what ſuch artful offenders have little cauſe to believe they ever ſhall. Obſerve but the caſe of thoſe, to whom the text immediately relates. They were *made free from ſin*, as the next verſe tells us, they had *brought forth fruit unto holineſs*, they were in the way to *everlaſting life*: yet the apoſtle calls their paſt faults, knowing doubtleſs what he ſaid, *thoſe things whereof ye are now aſhamed*. And indeed let any one in the ſame condition ſay, whether his comforts are not often embittered, and

* Wiſd. xvii. 11. † Iſa. lvii. 20.
‡ Pſ. xliv. 15. § Luke vii. 47.

and his proſpect clouded, by mortifying remembrances of his former tranſgreſſions: whether he hath not frequently returning doubts of God's forgiveneſs; whether he well knows, how to forgive himſelf.

But very commonly ſhame comes at laſt to ſurround the ſinner on all ſides in ſuch a manner, that he is aſhamed to repent, though he perceives the neceſſity of it in the ſtrongeſt light: and between his agitations of this kind, and the tyranny of his unlawful deſires, authoriſed by habitual indulgence, he is reduced to the moſt lamentable ſtate that the preſent life knows or can know: continuing the practice of wickedneſs with his eyes open to all its deformities and dangers: condemning and abominating himſelf for what he doth, yet going on to do, what he condemns and abominates.

Thus you ſee what internal, as well as external, ſufferings, naturally belong to irreligious courſes. It muſt however be acknowledged, that though always to be expected, they do not always ariſe to near the ſame height. For ſometimes the worſt of men continue in the moſt unaccountable proſperity, of health, circumſtances, and even reputation. Sometimes alſo education, example, general cuſtom, falſe reaſoning, may in a conſiderable meaſure take off the ſhame of ſeveral ſins, and give a ſort, ſuch as it is, of credit to them. Some perſons likewiſe either have originally, or ſoon acquire, ſuch an inſenſibility of heart or giddy thoughtleſſneſs, that they do not undergo what others do, when they have acted amiſs. And therefore, leſt any poſſibility ſhould remain to flatter any one, that he may be wicked, and yet eſcape what he deſerves for it, the apoſtle, to deter us effectually from ſin, hath added in the text,

III. The future puniſhment, that awaits it, *for the end of theſe things is death.*

That awful word is well known to ſignify, in many places of ſcripture, a ſtate of miſery, as life doth of happineſs. They are here placed in direct oppoſition: and the meaning evidently is what our Saviour elſewhere expreſſes: *Theſe ſhall go away into everlaſting puniſhment; but the righteous into life eternal*[*].

It might be very ſufficient to determine the choice of man,

[*] Matth. xxv. 46.

that wickedneſs eſſentially tends to produce miſery to its authors, and generally doth produce it, though now and then the caſe were to prove otherwiſe. But God is further concerned: and the attributes of his nature and the honour of his government require, that no one ſinner ſhall ever have cauſe, upon the whole, to rejoice in his iniquities, and glory in his diſobedience. If our Maker is allwiſe and almighty, he can provide for this: if he is juſt and holy, he will. For elſe this world of his would be ruled, as we ourſelves can feel, and much more then muſt he, that it ought not. Poſſibly ſo minute a regard may appear to ſome, beneath him. But if it was not beneath him to create all things, it can never be ſo to conduct them to their proper end. If he ſuperintends continually, as he doth, even the leaſt part and movement of the material creation, can it be unfit for him to watch over the actions of rational beings? For what is there worthy of his attention, if they be not?

Theſe conſiderations, confirmed by our inbred ſenſe of the ill deſert of wickedneſs, yet oppoſed again by inſtances of its ſeeming impunity, and by the frequent calamities of the good, raiſed in the minds of men, from age to age, preplexing doubts concerning the providence of God; to which however all other things around them gave full teſtimony. Sometimes they ſolved the difficulty, by diſcovering that the ſeeming happineſs of the wicked was not real: ſometimes by obſerving that it ſoon ended in great miſery. Yet they were often forced to take refuge and intrench themſelves in their general aſſurance of the divine juſtice; though when and how exerciſed, they knew not. But there being no appearance at all of a conſtant and proportionate exerciſe of it in this life, the wiſeſt and beſt of them reaſonably concluded, there muſt be another, deſigned to rectify whatever was wrong here. Yet a future and unſeen ſtate of exiſtence, in which we were not to ſhare, till our preſent frame was diſſolved, had the look of an object too remote for human faculties to diſcern with certainty: ſo that many good men were tempted to queſtion it; and thoſe of an oppoſite character too eaſily brought themſelves to diſbelieve it. At leaſt the convictions and preſages of it, which they induſtriouſly ſtifled, had no uniform influence on their conduct. And therefore, after various intimations of this great truth given from

above,

above, to the earlieſt and following ages, for ſome confirmation of what reaſon ſuggeſted, God hath made it fully known to us chriſtians, that *he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteouſneſs by that man whom he hath ordained**: *a day of wrath and revelation of his righteous judgement; when he will render to every man according to his deeds: to them that obey not the truth, but obey unrighteouſneſs, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguiſh, upon every ſoul of man that doth evil*†. So that now, to uſe the words of *Job*, *hell is naked, and deſtruction hath no covering*‡.

Here then is a conſideration, before which all that can be ſaid or imagined in favour of ſin vaniſhes at once. And were it conſtantly as productive of pleaſure and profit and eſteem in the world, and as conſiſtent with peace in our own breaſts, as it uſually is the contrary, yet would not a moment's deliberation be neceſſary in order to renounce it. For what God will puniſh, never let man hope to be happy in.

The very apprehenſion of his puniſhing, the *fearful looking for of judgement and fiery indignation*§, which no one, who believes in God and diſobeys him, can poſſibly avoid long together, is enough to ſour the very ſweeteſt of unlawful enjoyments, and in the midſt of mirth to ſink the heart with heavineſs. Let every ſinner conſult his own heart, if it be not. Or how little ſoever he may feel or dread this at preſent, yet no one can tell, how ſoon and how deep *the arrows of the Almighty* may be fixed *within him, the poiſon of them drink up his ſpirit*, and *the terrors of God ſet themſelves in array againſt him*‖. Or could he go on ſpeaking peace to himſelf through life, yet the approach of death may rouſe him on a ſudden from this dream, and croud ſuch horrors into the ſmall remainder of his days, as will far exceed the longeſt enjoyments of paſt ſin; horrors accompained with the inſupportable aggravation, that ſo far as man can judge, they ſeize him too late to do good.

But what avails it, if the wicked could eſcape the previous fears of judgement, ſince they cannot eſcape the judgement itſelf? *For behold the day cometh, that ſhall burn as an oven, and*

* Acts xvii. 31. † Rom. ii. 5, 6, 8, 9. ‡ Job xxvi. 6.
§ Heb. x. 27. ‖ Job vi. 4.

*and all that do wickedly ſhall be ſtubble; and the day that cometh ſhall burn them up, ſaith the Lord of Hoſts**. As to the particulars of this puniſhment, curioſity is by no means the diſpoſition it was intended to raiſe: and for the degree and duration of it, we are incompetent and partial judges of our own deſerts, even in our moſt ſerious hours; and much leſs are we qualified in the ſeaſons of thoughtleſs gaiety and bold ſelf-confidence. God alone knows what is juſt and requiſite: and from his declarations we muſt learn our fate: whoſe threatnings are in all reſpects as alarming as words can diſcribe; and we may aſſure ourſelves they will not be found vain terrors. Undoubtedly the ſufferings of men will be as different hereafter, as their guilt is here. But whoſoever ſhall ſin preſumptuouſly in hopes of a light puniſhment, will by that very puniſhment merit a heavy one. And who is able to conceive, to what the loweſt degree may amount, of the miſery that will then proceed, from the final and exemplary vengeance of omnipotence on impenitent offenders, from the bitter reflections of their own conſciences on their folly and vileneſs, in firſt diſobeying God, injuring their fellow-creatures, perverting themſelves, then refuſing the reconciliation which their Creator offered them, their Redeemer died to obtain for them, their Sanctifier was ready to apply to them; and laſtly from the abſence of all comfort and all hope in thoſe regions, *where their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched*†? *For ſuch are the dwellings of the wicked; and this is the place of him, that knoweth not God*‡. *Can thy heart endure, or can thy hands be ſtrong, in the day that I ſhall deal with thee? I the Lord have ſpoken it, and will do it*§.

The ſubject is much too dreadful to be enlarged on farther: and it would ill become, did not the miniſtry committed to us require it, one ſinner to denounce againſt another, terrors like theſe. Far be it from us to *make the heart of the righteous ſad, whom God hath not made ſad*‖; or affright the penitent, humble, vigilant believer with *devouring fire* and *everlaſting burnings*¶; inſtead of teaching them to rejoice and triumph, that *there is no condemnation to them, who are in Chriſt Jeſus***. But whatever wilful or habitual tranſgreſſor, whatever perſon hitherto

* Mal. iv. 1. † Iſa. lxvi. 24. Mark ix. 44, 46, 48. ‡ Job xviii. 21.
§ Ezek. xxii. 14. ‖ Ezek. xiii. 22. ¶ Iſa. xxxiii. 14. ** Rom. viii. 1.

hitherto indifferent or inattentive to the ſtate of his ſoul, at any time hears us, to him we muſt ſay, if there be any conviction of your danger awakened in your breaſt, do not ſuppreſs it, do not run away from it, do not ſuffer company, amuſement or buſineſs to wear it off: but go, and in ſecret bewail yourſelf before God, earneſtly beg pardon and grace for the merits of your crucified Redeemer, throw yourſelf entirely on the mercy freely offered in his name, firmly reſolve, in confidence of his ſtrength, not your own, againſt all ſin, all imprudence, all negligence for the future; and recollect every day of your lives that ſolemn admonition: *Be not deceived: God is not mocked: whatſoever a man ſoweth, that ſhall he alſo reap. For he that ſoweth to his fleſh, ſhall of the fleſh reap corruption: but he that ſoweth to the Spirit, ſhall of the Spirit reap life everlaſting*[*].

[*] Gal. vi. 7, 8.

SER.

SERMON LXXIII.

Ardent Duties of Obtaining Piety and Virtue, ever Favoured by the Almighty.

MATTH. v. 6.

Bleſſed are they which do hunger and thirſt after righteouſneſs: for they ſhall be filled.

WHATEVER objections the vain or vicious make againſt religion, they muſt allow, if they have any regard to truth remaining, not only that nothing elſe promiſes happineſs hereafter, but that nothing is ſo likely to give happineſs even here, as that diſpoſition of mind, to which religion propoſes to bring us. For he, who loves God ſincerely, and obeys him willingly, and truſts in him cheerfully; who delights in doing juſtice and ſhewing goodneſs to his fellow-creatures; and takes pleaſure in regulating his conduct by the dictates of reaſon and ſcripture; ſtudying to be uſeful in his ſtation, and keeping his heart ſhut againſt every hurtful indulgence, while he opens it in a proper degree to every innocent gratification, hath unqueſtionably the trueſt enjoyment of his being, that is poſſible. He deſtroys not his health by intemperance, nor his fortune by extravagance, nor his character by criminal or mean behaviour. He generally obtains eſteem and friendſhip from others; and he always feels the moſt comfortable teſtimony of his own conſcience. Whatever he denies himſelf, or parts with, it is for a valuable conſideration, the diſcharge of his duty: whatever he ſuffers, he eſcapes the greateſt of evils, remorſe and ſhame: and he enjoys the greateſt good, a conſcious ſenſe of the divine favour, conducting him graciouſly through the afflictions of this life to an endleſs felicity in the next, that ſhall be the more abundant for them: and where ſhall we find

upon

upon earth a ſecurer, an eaſier, a more joyful ſituation? right actions, it muſt be owned, are often accompanied, in the beginning of a chriſtian courſe, with great inward ſtruggles. But they diminiſh continually, in proportion as a right temper is formed: and when we arrive at a proper maturity in goodneſs, we ſhall be intirely free from difficulties, and abſolutely at peace.

But then it is objected, that allowing ſuch a ſtate to be ever ſo happy, we have no proſpect of attaining it in a ſufficient meaſure to afford us any feeling of that happineſs. And experience is imagined by too many to confirm this apprehenſion. Moſt of thoſe who live either in vice or neglect of piety, make at one time or other warm reſolutions, and, it may be, vigorous attempts, to throw off wrong habits and become religious. But they find it an unpleaſing, laborious, painful work. And let them endeavour as earneſtly as they will; nay, be ever ſo much perſuaded for a while, that they have gained conſiderable ground; they are very liable to relapſe, more or leſs, into their former tranſgreſſions or omiſſions, contrary to all their hopes. Daunted at this, they draw immediately a haſty concluſion, that nature is not to be altered, and cuſtom is ſecond nature: that it would be well for them indeed, if they had that command of themſelves, that ſome have; but how much ſoever they may envy them, they muſt of force be content with their own condition; for it ſignifies nothing to ſtrive againſt what they ſhall never get the maſtery of, or aſpire to what they ſhall never arrive at. And ſo they ſit down ſatisfied with this plea, lay aſide the thought of growing better, and then of courſe grow continually worſe. Yet plainly, if endeavouring would prevent that only, it would be worth while: for, next to being good, being as little bad as we can, is our evident intereſt, with reſpect to both worlds.

But we may juſtly hope for much more. And that we may not doubt of it, our Saviour hath aſſured us of it. In the very beginning of his ſermon on the mount, he lays it down: *Bleſſed are they which do hunger and thirſt after righteouſneſs; for they ſhall be filled.* Whoever truly deſires to become pious and virtuous, and purſues that great point in the right method, with due perſeverance, ſhall never fail of attaining his end. And the whole word of God teaches the ſame thing. Why then ſhould we not believe it, and act on that belief? if we act without it indeed; our attempts will be as faint as our hopes.

But *this is the victory, that overcometh the world, even our faith* *. Not a preſumptuous faith in ourſelves alone: that will certainly deceive us; and is the very cauſe, that ſo many fall to their utter ruin, when they thought they ſtood firmeſt: but a truſt and reliance on the promiſed grace of God, through him who died to obtain for us power, as well as pardon; a fixed perſuaſion, that *we can do all things through Chriſt which ſtrengtheneth us*: which he doth by a double aſſurance, of preſent help, as well as a future reward. This help he hath expreſsly engaged to every chriſtian, in every difficulty, on the reaſonable terms, of humbly praying for it, and honeſtly making uſe of it. What ſhould hinder us then from *working out our own ſalvation*, when God is ready to *work in us both to will and to do* †; both good deſires, and the accompliſhment of them? Our bad inclinations may be too hard for us, but not for him. He will certainly qualify us for what he commands and expects: elſe his precepts would be mockery, and his puniſhments cruelty.

But ſtill it is alledged by many, that in fact, though they do both endeavour and pray, they cannot become good, even in their outward behaviour; much leſs in their hearts. And perfectly good we do not ſay they can become at preſent: but why not ſufficiently to enjoy from it much peace and comfort? Let us examine the pretended impoſſibility of this a little more diſtinctly. It is confeſſed, our ſpiritual frame is weak, and was grievouſly diſordered by the fall. But however, though *in our fleſh*, to uſe the words of the apoſtle, *dwelleth no good thing*, yet *after the inward man we delight in the law of God* ‡. Through his mercy we have ſtill right and worthy principles, as well as wrong and bad ones. We have ſtill diſpoſitions in our breaſts, to eſteem and honour goodneſs, to be grateful for benefits, to obſerve the commands and ſubmit to the diſpoſal of a juſt, wiſe, and kind ſuperior. Now theſe, directed to their propereſt object, Almighty God, are love, obedience and reſignation to him, in which conſiſts a ſpirit of religion. We have alſo by nature, not only tender affections in the nearer relations of life, but a general ſenſe and approbation of honeſty and truth, of good-will, pity, and forgiveneſs towards all with whom we have to do: and theſe things comprehend our duty to our neighbour.

* 1 John v. 4. † Phil. ii. 12, 13. ‡ Rom. vii. 18, 22.

neighbour. Then, as to what we owe to ourſelves: reaſonable creatures muſt think reaſon ought to be followed, rather than paſſion and appetite; muſt condemn the exceſſes, that deſtroy their underſtanding or health; and be ſhocked at violations of decency and modeſty. So that in truth, we have the ſeeds within us of every thing good, as well as evil. And all we need is, to cultivate the one, and pluck up the other, and we are what we ſhould be. It is acknowledged, we have not ſtrength of our own to root out our vices; and our virtues will never bear fruit, without kindly influences from above. But ſince God is ready to give us all we really want, we may labour with full as much aſſurance of ſucceeding, as if we had it of our own.

There are inſtances but too many, of perſons bringing themſelves into habits contrary to reaſon and nature: why ſhould it be impoſſible to acquire ſuch, as agree with both? We can abſtain from faults, for which we have ever ſo great a love, when our intereſt requires it, when ſome favourite purſuit or fancy is ſerved by it. This cannot therefore, in general, be extremely difficult: for very often the motive of ſuch ſelf-denial is trifling enough. And why do we then perſuade ourſelves, that love of God and our duty, and hope of eternal happineſs, and fear of eternal miſery, cannot have an equal influence upon us? The truth is, we need but try heartily, and we ſhall find it can; ſhall find that we are able by a firm reſolution, founded on faith in heaven, to abſtain from any one ſinful action whatever: and therefore, by repeating the reſolution, from any number of ſuch actions.

Indeed, merely reſtraining the outward acts of vice, is not being virtuous: Virtue conſiſts in the inward diſpoſition of the heart. But a courſe of ſuch reſtraints uniformly carried on with that view, will as certainly, in time, change our diſpoſitions in this reſpect, as we ſee it doth in all others. We grow contented, and pleaſed, by degrees, with every place, and every way of life, we are put into: and become fond at laſt, of what we were once quite indifferent about; nay, of what we diſliked very much. But beſides the general force of cuſtom, there is a peculiar complacency, connected by our Maker with the performance of our duty; which the longeſt habit of ſin, cannot ſo entirely extinguiſh, but that, whenever we return to the right way, our heart will applaud us for every ſtep we take;

joyful proſpects will open to us, and invite us on through every difficulty; till at length we ſhall get beyond them, and find *the ways of wiſdom pleaſantneſs; and all her paths, peace*[*].

Perhaps this may not be ſo ſoon, as we could wiſh or expect. Yet, not uncommonly, God meets the very firſt advances, that he hath inclined men to make towards him, and changes their hearts almoſt totally at once. But be it ever ſo long, what have we elſe to do, but go on and wait his time? Attaining a religious ſtate of mind is not a matter, at which one would aim only, if it could be acquired in a ſhort ſpace, and with little trouble. It is the great, the one thing that we have to be concerned about in life: what muſt be done, or we are miſerable; and if once done well, makes us happy for ever. Therefore, how ſlow or how difficult our progreſs may be, is little to the purpoſe: we ſhould go on with more pleaſure indeed, if we went on faſter and ſmoother: but our buſineſs is to go on as we can. And whoever hath ſtrength enough to make a ſtand, may quickly have enough to gain ground; and, by purſuing his advantage, will undoubtedly at length gain a complete victory.

I am very ſenſible, how often this fails to be the caſe. But the reaſon is: either men do not ſet about reforming themſelves with the ſincerity, the ſpirit and the prudence, that they do about other points of importance; or they have not patience to perſiſt in it.

Moſt people, far from wiſhing to mend their faults, are very unwilling to know that they have any. Now what can be the meaning of this? In all other employments, whoever is deſirous to do well, examines carefully into the defects of his own work, receives with thankfulneſs the judgement of his friends, turns to uſe even the cenſures of his enemies; and from whenceſoever the knowledge of any imperfection comes, hath no quiet, till he hath corrected it to the beſt of his power. But is it thus we acted in the government of our hearts, and the conduct of our lives? If not, whence comes the difference? Doubtleſs from hence, that we are not ſo ſincere in one caſe, as the other. It is not *righteouſneſs*, piety, and virtue, that we *hunger and thirſt after*; but a fair ſhow, even though it be a falſe one, to others and ourſelves. We have ſmall regard to what

[*] Prov. iii. 17.

what promotes not this: and what leſſens it, we conſider only as an injury and a loſs; not at all as an opportunity given us of reforming and improving our hearts and lives, notwithſtanding that we profeſs the ſtrongeſt deſire of it.

But ſuppoſe a perſon ever ſo deſirous to conquer ſome vices, yet if he indulge others; or ſuppoſe he endeavours to get rid of all immoralities, yet if he allow himſelf in profaneneſs or forgetfulneſs of God, his aim is inconſiſtent, and he muſt not hope to ſucceed. Every virtue is connected with every other virtue: all virtue is connected with religion: and they will not flouriſh apart. Specious appearances there may be: but not uſeful realities. We muſt *hunger and thirſt after* univerſal *righteouſneſs*, not one part only, if we expect to be filled from above.

Nay though we ſhould wiſh to grow better in all reſpects, yet wiſhing it faintly, and attending to it ſlightly, will never effect it. If we make riches, or power, or pleaſure, or any thing elſe of this world, our great aim; and look upon the religious and moral government of ourſelves as an inferior matter; not to be overlooked indeed, but requiring only ſo much regard, as theſe more important affairs will admit; our improvement in it will be very little, if any at all: *For we cannot ſerve two maſters* *: But did we once ſee, and will keep in mind, that piety and virtue are our buſineſs here; that forming our hearts to a practical eſteem of reaſon and truth, to a temper of juſtice and goodneſs towards men, of reverence and obedience to God, of love to Chriſt, of joy in the Holy Ghoſt, is our main concern, compared with which every thing elſe is nothing: it would make a wonderful difference, both in our diligence and our ſucceſs.

But ſtill, the greateſt diligence may fail, unleſs we proceed in a proper method. If we reſolve againſt ſin; and will not reſolve to be on our guard againſt the things, that lead us into it: If we deſire to *grow in grace* †; and will not uſe the means, which God hath appointed for our growth in it: what wonder is it, that we fail? Nay, though we take the righteſt methods imaginable, and proceed in them, for a time, with the greateſt ſpirit: yet if, after a while, we become *wearied, and faint*

* Matth. vi. 24. † 2 Pet. iii. 18.

*faint in our minds**, and leave off; all our paſt labour will be in vain. We cannot indeed keep to the ſame pitch conſtantly: but whenever the want of it hath betrayed us into a fault, we can recover and raiſe ourſelves up to it again. And though a freſh repetition of the ſame fault were to ſucceed often; yet, recollection and freſh reſolution may be repeated as often, till through the grace of God they become effectual.

But here people uſually object; they cannot reſolve againſt ſin more ſtrongly, than they have done; yet their former reſolutions have ſtood them in no ſtead: and to what purpoſe is it to make more! Now every one ſees, how abſurd this way of thinking would be in the affairs of common life. Scarce any one ſucceeds at the firſt trial, uſually not till after many trials, in almoſt any thing they go about to learn. And yet what do they do? They endeavour on: and though perhaps they cannot poſſibly be more in earneſt at laſt, than they were at firſt, yet inſenſibly, themſelves know not how, they overcome the difficulty ſo intirely, that very often neither any feeling, nor any notion of it remains.

Let us therefore imitate their perſeverance; and not be impatient, and out of hopes, becauſe of a few failures: always think lowly of what we have done; but always highly of what through God's help, we may do. Being uneaſy at our paſt miſcarriages, is indeed a duty, ſo far as it teaches us to be humble, to aſk pardon, and ſtrive to behave better. But if we do nothing but dwell upon and aggravate our fault to our own minds; till we have ſo little opinion of, and ſo little liking to, ourſelves, that we have no heart to ſet about amendment; a ſenſibility, thus exceſſive, defeats its own end; and becomes a new ſin, added to all the former. We muſt therefore never deſpair, and give up our caſe as incurable, and our ſouls as loſt; for they are not ſo. God is our phyſician; and no diſeaſe is too inveterate for him. We have only to ſtudy and follow his directions faithfully, and the final event is infallible. If we fail in our duty; we may, if we will, from that very failure get more ſtrength and ſkill for the future: by obſerving, through what wrongneſs or weakneſs in our temper, what raſhneſs or negligence in our conduct, the advantage againſt us was gained; and

* Heb. xii. 3.

and thinking, what precautions will be moſt effectual againſt another trial. A moderate ſhare of time and pains, honeſtly ſpent thus, would give us happy earneſts of obtaining at length an intire conqueſt: which however, though always poſſible, will be much the eaſier and ſurer, the earlier we prepare for and engage in the conflict; before we give the enemy leiſure to ſtrengthen himſelf, by further weakening and corrupting us. *My ſon, gather inſtruction from thy youth up: ſo ſhalt thou find wiſdom till thine old age. Come unto her as one that ploweth and ſoweth, and wait for her good fruits: for thou ſhalt not toil much in labouring about her, but ſhalt eat of her fruits right ſoon.—My ſon, if thou wilt, thou ſhalt be taught: and if thou apply thy mind, thou ſhalt be prudent.—Let thy mind be upon the ordinances of the Lord, and meditate continually in his commandments: He ſhall eſtabliſh thine heart, and give thee wiſdom at thine own deſire*[*].

But ſuppoſing the worſt, that we have been negligent, or even groſly ſinful in time paſt; yet not only reaſon and the promiſes of ſcripture, but experience proves the poſſibility of our recovery. Did not *David* recover from adultery and murder, *Manaſſeh* from idolatry, *Zaccheus* the publican from covetouſneſs and injuſtice, *Peter* from denying Chriſt, *Paul* from blaſpheming and perſecuting? Have not multitudes in all ages, many in our own, ſome perhaps known to us, recovered from the vileſt acts, from the longeſt habits of ſin? Why then cannot we do what they have done?

It muſt be confeſſed indeed, that ſome have naturally diſpoſitions much more favourable both to innocence and repentance, than others. But God hath made none of his creatures incapable of what he made them for. And ſince he condeſcends to help us, we may be ſure he will help us as much as we really want. The weakneſs of man, the force of temptation, the difficulty of duty, are of ſmall account, where the Almighty is ready to interpoſe. Our own ſtrength indeed cannot increaſe, in proportion as our trials do: but that, which proceeds from him, can. And this is the great felicity of our dependance upon him, that while our ſenſe of continually needing his aid is fitted, beyond all things, to keep us humble: our aſſurance of having it, if we will aſk and uſe it, gives us a comfort and a ſpirit, that nothing elſe can equal.

God

[*] Eccluſ vi. 18, 19, 32, 37.

God will certainly enable us to do every thing which is neceſſary to be done. And though he may poſſibly ſuffer us to ſtrive againſt ſome of our ſmaller faults, much longer and more ineffectually, than we could wiſh; yet we may be aſſured, he hath wiſe and good reaſons for exerciſing us with ſuch difficulties; and provided we continue *the good fight* with patience and courage, whatever labour and pain it may cauſe us now, it ſhall not hinder, but increaſe our reward hereafter; and the proſpect of that is abundantly ſufficient to make us happy in the mean while. No that we can ever fit ourſelves to appear before God, and be juſtified in his ſight, on the footing of a covenant of works. Far be from us the haughty imagination. We deſire to be accepted, not for what we have done, but for what our bleſſed Redeemer hath done on our account: *and to be found in him, not having our own righteouſneſs, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Chriſt, the righteouſneſs which is of God by faith**. After this we are to *hunger and thirſt* both as the means of perſonal righteouſneſs, and the ground of God's accepting it. In this alone we are to hope firſt, and rejoice afterwards.

Yet ſtill, *if in this life only we had hope in Chriſt, we might* ſometimes be *of all men moſt miſerable*†. Not but that, even then, a ſteady courſe of virtue and religion would in general be evidently for the intereſt of mankind, and almoſt of every individual. But after all, there would be caſes too often happening, in which the trouble of combating evil inclinations and habits would be ſo great, the progreſs in goodneſs ſo imperfect, and the enjoyment of it ſo precarious and ſhort-lived; that human reſolution muſt be ſuppoſed likely to ſtagger and faint, under ſuch trials. But ſince we are aſſured of enjoying to eternity in perfection, whatever graces we have cultivated here with ſincerity; the toilſomeneſs of the work, and the ſlowneſs of the ſucceſs, ought not to deter us in the leaſt. Let the watchfulneſs over our conduct, the reſtraint of our paſſions, and wrong deſires, be ever ſo uneaſy; let this uneaſineſs laſt ever ſo long; let our advancement, after doing our beſt, be mixed with ever ſuch mortifying failures and frailties: yet, if we be faithful unto the end, every one of theſe ſeemingly diſcouraging circumſtances will have full allowance made for it, and

* Phil. iii. 9. † 1 Cor. xv. 19.

and be moſt equitably conſidered to our advantage. We have only to take care of our duty; and the goodneſs of our Maker will be ſure to take care of our happineſs. Nor is it indeed, could we but think aright, of very great conſequence, whether we begin to taſte that happineſs, in any conſiderable degree, during our momentary life on earth; which however truly good perſons, almoſt, if not abſolutely without exceptions, do; or whether it be reſerved for that approaching time, when all they, that have *hungered and thirſted after righteouſneſs* here, *ſhall be abundantly filled with the plenteouſneſs of God's houſe, and made to drink of the river of his pleaſures**. *For with him is fulneſs of joy, and at his right hand there are pleaſures for evermore*†. *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye ſtedfaſt, unmoveable, always bounding in the work of the Lord: foraſmuch as ye know, that your labour is not in vain in the Lord*‡.

* Pſ. xxxvi. 8, 9. † Pſ. xvi. 11. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 58.

SERMON. LXXIV.

The Essence of True Religion.

James i. 27.

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

TO understand the meaning of these words fully, it must be observed, that St. *James* wrote his epistle to the *Jewish* believers in Christ; many of whom were not yet sufficiently apprized, how grievously the traditions of their elders had corrupted religion. For long-received errors are seldom entirely cast off, till some time after the truths, which, by evident consequence, prove them to be errors, are embraced. These new converts therefore, being accustomed from their infancy to think very highly of that purity of faith and worship, which was their principal distinction from the heathen world, continued even after they were christians, to give it an undue preference to the weightiest duties of common life. Their opinion of ceremonial worship indeed the gospel hath probably lowered: but it must have increased their esteem of faith. And though it was easy to understand that no faith could be valuable, unless it brought forth the good fruit of universal obedience; yet wrong inclinations led many to mistake the matter: who accordingly contenting themselves with a speculative belief, and formal devotion, thought and spoke ill of those, who either differed from them in religious tenets, or laid any great stress on moral practice. Now had the apostles indulged imaginations and behaviour so agreeable to corrupt nature, undoubtedly they would have gained by it a much larger number of disciples. But *they had not so learned Christ**. Each, as opportunity

* Eph. iv. 20.

tunity preſented itſelf, diligently oppoſed this dreadful perverſion of *the doctrine according to godlineſs**; but none with a warmer zeal, than St. *James*: who, preſiding over the chriſtians of *Jeruſalem*, muſt have had the moſt experience of it. He therefore, throughout this whole epiſtle, pleads earneſtly for obſerving the moral duties, beneficence and ſelf-government: the latter to be exerciſed in our words, as well as actions.

But eſpecially in the text, he hath exalted them ſo high, that he may ſeem, and I fear hath been apprehended by ſome, to exclude every thing elſe, as unneceſſary. For what occaſion is there, it may be ſaid, to concern ourſelves about acts of piety, when we are plainly told by an apoſtle, that a good-natured, inoffenſive, regular life is the whole of our duty? Now had the apoſtle told us this, he would have contradicted both reaſon and himſelf. If right ſentiments and behaviour be requiſite in ſome caſes; they muſt in all. If the good qualities of our fellow-creatures deſerve proportionable eſteem; the infinite perfections of our Creator demand the higheſt poſſible veneration. If we owe them gratitude for their kindneſſes, which they do us; we owe beyond compariſon more to him, from whoſe bounty every object and every capacity of enjoyment is derived. If our earthly ſuperiors are intitled to reſpect and ſubmiſſion; the King and Lord of all hath an unſpeakably ſtronger claim, that we ſhould pay him the profoundeſt homage, believe his inſtructions, and do his will without reſerve, however notified; be abſolutely reſigned to his diſpoſal, truſt in his care, and live as being always in his preſence. If laſtly, when we have miſbehaved to a man like ourſelves, we are humbly to acknowledge it, and condeſcend to every reaſonable condition of pardon; ſurely, when we have ſinned againſt our heavenly Father, we are bound to the deepeſt ſelf-condemnation, the moſt penitent confeſſion, the readieſt compliance with whatever method, he, who alone can judge of the proper one, ſhall preſcribe for our reconciliation.

Plainly therefore a religious and chriſtian behaviour is equally neceſſary with a moral one: and there can neither be religion without feeling and expreſſing reverence to God; nor chriſtianity without believing the doctrines and obſerving the

* 1 Tim. vi. 3.

inſtitutions of Chriſt. Nor did St. *James* imagine there could. On the contrary, we find him enjoining faith and prayer, giving directions about public worſhip, and aſcribing great efficacy to the private miniſtrations of the elders of the church. Nay, in the very text, far from excluding a ſpirit of piety, he ſuppoſes the good deeds, which he ſpecifies, to be done with a view of appearing *pure and undefiled before God and the Father.* The perſons, to whom he wrote, had no doubt, whether Chriſt had commanded them to be religious: but they underſtood not fully, wherein religion conſiſted. Therefore knowing that they wanted comparatively but little incitement to the ſpeculative and devotional parts; he inſiſts on the other duties, in which they were deficient; kindneſs to their brethren, and virtuous reſtraint of themſelves. Thus he completes the ſcheme of chriſtianity, in perfect harmony with that, which St. *Paul* hath elſewhere given, by adding to the obligations of a *godly* life, thoſe of a *righteous* and *ſober* one*.

To ſet his doctrine before you in a ſtill clearer light, I ſhall proceed to ſhew,

I. What *viſiting the fatherleſs and widows in their affliction* implies.

II. What *keeping ourſelves unſpotted from the world* comprehends.

III. That theſe two things are principal parts of *pure and undefiled religion.*

I. What *viſiting the fatherleſs and widows in their affliction* implies.

Now, in ſcripture language, to *viſit* any one is to take ſuch notice of him, and treat him in ſuch manner, as his condition requires. For, as inattention and neglect are expreſſed by ſhutting the eyes, or turning them from any one; ſo attention and regard, whether in order to puniſh or to ſhew favour, are denoted by opening the eyes, and turning them towards him; which, in our tranſlation is often called *viſiting*: a word originally of the ſame import with frequently looking upon, and contemplating. For ſeeing and knowing any caſe, in man ought to be, and in God is always, connected with acting ſuitably to it. *The day of* his *viſitation* therefore, when wicked perſons or nations are the ſubject, is the day of his vengeance†: but that

* Tit. ii. 12. † Iſ. x. 3.

that *the Lord hath viſited and redeemed his people*, is the higheſt expreſſion of his love*. And in one paſſage of holy writ, theſe different ſenſes of the word are found together in a beautiful oppoſition. *Thus ſaith the Lord God of Iſrael againſt the paſtors, that feed my people: Ye have ſcattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not viſited them: behold, I will viſit upon you the evil of your doings, ſaith the Lord*†. Since therefore the proper notice, to be taken of perſons in diſtreſs, is to give them all the comfort and relief, that we can: this is what *viſiting* ſignifies in the text: as it doth alſo in our Saviour's future ſpeech to thoſe on his right hand: *I was ſick, and ye viſited me*‡.

To *viſit* thus *the fatherleſs and widows* is, in common acceptation, a work, not of juſtice but of compaſſion: ſo that St. *James* differs in phraſe from St. *Paul*; according to whom the ſecond great duty of religion is righteouſneſs. But as righteouſneſs there undoubtedly includes mercy; which indeed is but equity to our fellow-creatures, and ſtrict juſtice to God, who hath intruſted us with the care of them: ſo mercy here muſt include righteouſneſs; without which it cannot be real and conſiſtent. There are indeed perſons, who ſhew, and perhaps affect to ſhew, great humanity in ſome things, without honeſty of heart in others. One ſort pique themſelves on their tenderneſs and bounty, conſtant or occaſional, to thoſe whom they happen to like: another, on their charity to the poor, or ſympathy with the diſtreſſed, in general: a third, on their affability and obliging deportment to all the world. But ſtill, on ſome occaſions, they will be oppreſſive or fraudulent, corrupt or prejudiced, cruel or negligent. Now with men, at leaſt with the injudicious and inconſiderate, who make up a numerous body, ſuch partial virtue may often take. But God expects univerſal rightneſs of diſpoſition and behaviour: and our own conſciences, in every ſerious hour, will reproach us, if we fail in any branch. A conduct in ſome points beneficent, in others injurious, muſt of neceſſity be leſs uſeful to mankind than it ought: and for the moſt part, if not always, will be hurtful on the whole, both by its immediate effects, and the bad influence of its example.

Firſt therefore the foundation of juſtice muſt be lai; and then

* Luke i. 68. † Jer. xxiii. 2. ‡ Matth. xxv. 36.

then the beautiful ſuperſtructure of mercy will ſtand firm: which every one to his power ſhould be induſtrious in raiſing. For the ſtate of the world very loudly demands, that we not only abſtain from doing harm to each other, but do every kind of good, that we poſſibly can. St. *James* indeed hath mentioned but one, *viſiting the widows and fatherleſs in their affliction.* But our Saviour adds more acts of compaſſion concerning which inquiry will be made at the laſt day: and though he ſeems to ſpeak as if theſe alone would determine our final ſtate; yet he ſpeaks in the ſame manner, of other virtues, in his ſermon on the mount. And not only this, but the whole tenour of ſcripture proves, that every virtue muſt be practiſed; though frequently future happineſs is promiſed to a ſingle one: under which, in that caſe, all the reſt, eſpecially of the ſame ſort, are meant to be comprehended. For as they flow from the ſame principle, and are naturally connected, they are not ſuppoſed to be naturally disjoined. Thus in ſome places the love, in others the fear, or even the belief alone, of God, is put for the whole of religion; juſt as kindneſs to afflicted orphans and widows is put here for the whole of benevolence.

Nor indeed was it eaſy, if poſſible, to have pitched on a more proper ſpecimen. Virtuous actions are laudable only ſo far as they proceed from virtuous motives. Now ſome parts of kind behaviour may be intended merely to procure a return of the ſame: as complaiſance and courteſy. Others may be artful contrivances to promote our own more important worldly intereſts: as the multitude of ſervices, great and ſmall, which men are ſo officious in doing their ſuperiors. And the vanity of raiſing a high character may produce not a few: indeed all that lie open to public obſervation. But comforting and aſſiſting the afflicted and helpleſs poor, is a melancholy, troubleſome, expenſive work: and if performed with the privacy, needfull to acquit it from the cenſure of oſtentation, attracts but little of the world's regard, which is commonly fixed on objects widely different. This inſtance therefore was choſen by our apoſtle with the utmoſt prudence, to remind men, that the only genuine beneficence is that, which extends, as opportunity offers, to the leaſt inviting caſes.

Our

Our Saviour himſelf gave a rule of the ſame tendency, when, at a large feaſt, *he ſaid to him, that bade him; when thou makeſt a dinner or a ſupper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethern, neither thy kinſmen, nor rich neighbours; leſt they alſo bid thee again, and recompence be made thee. But when thou makeſt a feaſt, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind; and thou ſhalt be bleſſed. For they cannot recompenſe thee: for thou ſhalt be recompenſed at the reſurrection of the juſt**. His meaning was not, to forbid any of the proprieties or civilities of life: much leſs to enjoin a perverſe affectation of contradicting them. Neither his doctrine, nor his temper, were of this turn. On the contrary, he wrought a miracle once, to enable the maſter of a family to entertain his gueſts more plentifully†. But the cuſtom of the *Jewiſh* language, in comparing two things, is ſeemingly to prohibit that, which is only deſigned to be repreſented as the leſs valuable. Thus in the Old Teſtament God ſaith, *I will have mercy, and not ſacrifice*‡; that is, I eſteem it more than ſacrifice. Here then, in the ſame manner, our bleſſed Lord means to prefere charity to the poor, before hoſpitality and generoſity to ſuch as need it not: and under this one example to intimate a general caution, that we ſhould not content ourſelves with the performance of the more pleaſing offices of ſociety; (becauſe our inducements to theſe may be doubtful) but prove to others and our own minds, that our goodneſs is real and univerſal, by a more than ordinary care to fulfill thoſe obligations, which we ſhould naturally be moſt inclined to omit. And as theſe are not the ſame in all men: but ſome are apteſt to fail in one expreſſion of humanity, and ſome in another; we ought none of us to conſider any ſingle branch, however excellent, as if it were the whole: but each to think over the ſeveral particulars, be they of more or leſs moment, in which he can add to the ſatisfaction, or diminiſh the uneaſineſs of his fellow-creatures: that ſo, by exerting a benevolence, not laviſhed promiſcuouſly, but proportioned with judgement, to every perſon within the ſphere of his influence, he may, in this part of his duty, *be perfect and intire, wanting nothing*§.

Uſually indeed the rich and great can do good by far the moſt

* Luke xiv. 12,—14. † John ii. 1, &c.
‡ Hoſ. vi. 6. Matth. ix. 13. § James i. 4.

moſt effectually and extenſively. But others alſo, by dutifulneſs or affection ſhewn in the nearer relations of life, by virtuous example, advice prudently given, ſeaſonable aſſiſtance, deſerved recommendation, faithful ſervice, compaſſionate ſympathy, obliging notice, innocent chearfulneſs, and even common good humour, may be inſtruments of much more comfort and ſatisfaction to all around them, than is generally imagined.

But I now proceed to ſhow you,

II. What *keeping ourſelves unſpotted from the world* comprehends.

And in general it means, preſerving our lives and our hearts free from thoſe vices, to which either the natural impreſſions of ſenſible objects, or the additional force given them by prevailing cuſtom, may expoſe us. Now theſe are of different ſorts. We may learn from the world ſelfiſhneſs, envy, reſentment. But theſe interfere ſo continually both with juſtice and humanity, that in effect you have been cautioned againſt them under the former head. We may alſo learn pride; a ſin, which taints the mind of man beyond moſt things: not only renders him diſagreeable and injurious, and prevents his making reparation, though ſenſible that he owes it; but keeps him from perceiving his faults and his follies, and tempts him to think that application even to God for pardon and aſſiſtance is beneath him. Yet with this dreadful ſpirit our nature is ſo deeply infected, and we ſtrengthen one another ſo much in it by our behaviour, that it requires, both a ſtrict ſearch to find how far we are guilty of it, and uncommon care to root it out.

But the moſt prevailing defilement of the world is immoderate love of pleaſure: a diſpoſition of worſe conſequence, as multitudes profeſs not to ſee the harm of it. For they conceive ſuch exceedingly high opinions of the merit of good nature, and their own ſhare in this merit, that they are perfectly indifferent about every thing elſe, and violate the plaineſt rules of ſobriety and chaſtity without ſcruple. Yet ſuch men will appear, when the matter is examined, extremely deficient in the very point on which they reſt their character. For they always grieve and afflict their friends; they frequently wrong, in various ways, thoſe, whoſe happineſs they

they were bound, and perhaps had engaged, principally to consult; they entice others into sin, and leave them afterwards exposed to wretchedness; they introduce dissentions and dishonour into families, they disorder and weaken human society. And the wrongness of their conduct is so evident, that they are usually forced by a variety of arts to banish reflection: that they may, if possible, be ignorant of their own guilt, or at least inattentive to it. For would they but consider at all seriously, and without palliating, what unkind and cruel things they do, what good and worthy actions their course of life obliges them to omit, and how strongly their example tends to make others perhaps worse than themselves; they could not fail to see, that whatever pretences, and sometimes plausible ones, there may be to the contrary, no two things upon earth are in reality more inconsistent, than good nature and debauchery.

Indeed great numbers will acknowledge this; who yet strenuously plead, that, provided they do nothing prejudicial to others, there can be no harm in diverting and delighting themselves to the utmost in whatever suits their fancy. But besides the prudential objections to this scheme, it ought surely to be observed, that in point of duty we are bound to live and act agreeably to the nature given us. If passions and appetites had been the whole of our inward frame, we might allowably have indulged them to the full, like the rest of our fellow-brutes. If being also blest with reason, we are taught nothing more by it, than to abstain from hurting each other; so long as we observed that caution, it could not condemn us. But we feel ourselves qualified for better and worthier occupations, than the most innocent indulgences of sense. We experience a higher order of affections, endued with a rightful authority over the rest. These it is our business to cultivate here, in order to reap the fruit of them for ever hereafter. And all attachments to worldly objects, which make us overlook the worth, and neglect the improvement of our own souls, though they were not in the least injurious to others, are improper and criminal debasements of ourselves. Be they vehement pursuits of light amusements, grosser pleasures or more refined ones; that we should live to them, and fill up our time and our thoughts with them, as multitudes commonly do, is altogether unsuitable to creatures evidently formed for attentions and impressions of another sort, rational, moral, religious. And

though our preſent ſituation upon earth ſubjects us to many low employments, and offers to us many low gratifications, neither of which we are to diſdain, ſince they are appointed for us; yet we muſt habituate ourſelves to a ſuperiority over them, by fit exerciſes of ſelf-denial; and both conſider and uſe them, only as being ſubſervient to nobler purpoſes; ever fixing our chief regard on the duties of life, the ſtate of our own hearts, the relation which we bear to God, the ſpiritual and eternal bliſs, for which he deſigns us. Elſe, far from being *unſpotted by this world*, we ſhall be ſo immerſed in it, as not to be *meet for the inheritance of the ſaints in light* *.

Accordingly the ſcripture, which, coming from him, who beſt knows what is good for us, ought ſurely to be obeyed, were it ever ſo implicitly, both reſtrains our ſenſual enjoyments within certain limits, and requires a great diſengagement from the moſt allowable of earthly ſatisfactions and advantages, that we may have room in our breaſt, for purer joys. Our Lord himſelf hath told us; *No man can ſerve two maſters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or elſe he will hold to the one and deſpiſe the other. Ye cannot ſerve God and Mammon* †. And his apoſtles have enjoined us, *ſet your affections on things above, not on things on the earth* ‡. *Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the luſt of the fleſh, the luſt of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father* §. That is, immoderate fondneſs for the pleaſures of ſenſe, unreaſonable delight in beholding the increaſe of our wealth, haughty complacency in pre-eminence and power, are not diſpoſitions proceeding from God, nor conſiſtent with a ſpirit of true religion. We cannot indeed preſerve ourſelves from being ſolicited, perhaps from being moved and diſquieted, by ſome or other of the temptations that ſurround us: but from yielding to them, through divine aſſiſtance, we may.

Nor is it neceſſary for this purpoſe, either to retire out of ſociety, or live uncomfortably in it. The duties of our ſtations and ſeveral profeſſions we muſt faithfully perform, as part of the ſervice, which we owe to God, for he will accept the commonеſt

* Col. i. 12. † Matth. vi. 24. ‡ Col. iii. 2.
§ 1 John ii. 15, 16.

moneſt labour as ſuch, if it flows from that principle. The natural gratifications, which he hath provided for us, are neither unthankfully to be condemned, nor beyond reaſon ſuſpected, as unſafe. And they, who run into ſuch extremities, make religion appear uninviting to others, and lay heavier burthen on themſelves, than they will be able to bear, at leaſt without ſouring their tempers: a grievous fault; and in that caſe the leſs excuſable, as it is of their own bringing on, by going out of their way: whereas going forward in it would have intitled them both to ſurer protection and eaſier pardon.

But ſtill over-free indulgence is much more general, and uſually more hazardous, than overſtrict abſtinence. And all perſons, eſpecially all who enter far into the world, ſhould frequently and impartially examine, whether they are indeed ſo innocent, as they are apt to imagine; whether they are not growing vain and thoughtleſs, languid in their ſentiments of true honour and virtue, infrequent or ſpiritleſs in their devotions, unmindful of paſt ſins and future improvements, forgetful of their latter end. And proportionably as they diſcover any of theſe bad ſymptoms, they ſhould *take* moſt ſerious *heed to themſelves, leaſt their hearts be overcharged with the cares*, the purſuits, the diverſions, *of this life; and ſo that day come upon them unawares* *.

Let us all therefore determine, neither to fly from ſuch trials of our virtue, as providence hath deſigned to ſtrengthen and perfect it; nor yet run or be led into ſuch, as may probably overſet it; but uſe the good and bear the evil of this world with moderation; and prepare for the rewards of the next with diligence.

Having thus explained the two comprehenſive duties of benevolence and ſelf-government, preſcribed in the text, I come now to ſhew,

III. That they are principal parts of *pure and undefiled religion.*

Indeed without them there can be nothing, that deſerves the name. Religion is not a ſyſtem of ſpeculative opinions, nor a ritual of forms and ceremonies: but it conſiſts in that love to God, as a being perfectly holy in himſelf and good to us; and that dutifulneſs to him, as the author and ruler of the univerſe;

* Luke xxi. 34.

which engage men to ſeek his favour by imitating his nature and obeying his laws. If then we neither become ſuch as he is, nor do ſuch things as he commands, what pretence have we to call ourſelves pious perſons? "*We believe* in him." And ſo do *the devils* *. "We *worſhip* him." But utterly *in vain* †, while we continue to be, what he muſt for ever continue to hate; unkind to our fellow-creatures, or immoral in the conduct of ourſelves. Indeed what deſire can we have of the reward, which he promiſes, heavenly happineſs; when the temper, neceſſary to qualify us for enjoying it, is directly contrary to that, which we indulge? But a perſon humane in his heart, and careful in the government of his appetites and paſſions cannot, ordinarily ſpeaking, be *far from the kingdom of God* ‡. He hath no worldly motive to prejudice him againſt religion: but all imaginable reaſon to hope and believe it is true. His knowledge of what is right and fit will help to give him juſt conceptions of God: his eſteem for it will teach him to honour God: and the ſenſe, which he muſt have, of his many failures in it, will powerfully tend to make him humble and penitent, ſolicitous for pardon and aſſiſtance, in what manner ſoever beſtowed; and ambitious of that bleſſed ſtate, where he ſhall ſin no more, but his weak habits of goodneſs will attain their maturity, and bring forth their fruit in perfection.

Thus do virtuous diſpoſitions conduct men to religion: and in return, one main buſineſs of religion is to ſtrengthen and improve virtuous diſpoſitions. Doubtleſs the love of God is *the firſt and great commandment* §: but the love of our neighbour, and of inward holineſs, are the principal evidences, which he requires, of our loving him ‖. Doubtleſs he is to be moſt reverently worſhipped; and every duty, which he hath enjoined, whether by reaſon or by ſcripture alone, moſt conſcientiouſly performed: all compariſons of one ſort with the other, which may contribute to depreciate either, muſt be carefully avoided; and the inexpreſſible good influence of merely chriſtian precepts on the obſervance of all the reſt, thankfully acknowledged. But ſtill, moral obligations are by much the moſt numerous and extenſive: the temptations, that we have to tranſgreſs them, are much the ſtrongeſt: the good, which

* James ii. 19. † Matth. xv. 9. ‡ Mark xii. 34.
§ Matth. xxi. 38. ‖ 1 John v. 3.

which, fulfilling them doth to mankind, is much the most considerable; the proof, which it gives, of our advancement in piety, is much the surest. And they are completely comprehended under the two heads, mentioned in the text, good-will to others, and due regulation of ourselves: one of which includes all the exertions of virtue; the other, all the restraints of it.

If indeed we practise ever so many of both only from regard to interest or ease, fondness of applause, fear of worldly punishment or disesteem; securing these points will be our whole recompence. If we do it from a sense of duty; that sense is very defective, whilst duty to God is felt out of the consideration. Nay, if our principal end be obedience to him, and we flatter ourselves that our obedience is meritorious or faultless; our pride will convert the pretended homage into an insult. But if we faithfully endeavour to perform every moral precept, as the law of our Creator; not trusting to our own strength, but devoutly using the appointed means for obtaining the aid of the Holy Spirit; and then with humility of heart offer up to our heavenly Father all that we do, as *our reasonable service*,* ; but unworthy of his acceptance, otherwise than through his mercy, promised to the mediation of our blessed Lord: this will be the fullest demonstration, and the only effectual one, that we can give of *pure religion and undefiled*. Scripture teaches it: our understandings acquiesce in it: the experience of the great day will verify it: and the ministers of the gospel are expressly required to publish the notice of it before hand. *This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly: that they, which have believed in God, may be careful to maintain good works* †.

* Rom. xii. 1. † Tit. iii. 8.

SER.

SERMON LXXV.

The Folly and Danger of Resting in the Mere Form of Godliness.

2 Tim. iii. 5.

Having a form of godlineſs, but denying the power thereof: from ſuch turn away.

THESE words conclude a moſt dreadful deſcription given by St. *Paul* of the ſtate of mankind *in the laſt days*. Having foretold the general practice of almoſt every ſin, that could be named, he ſurpriſingly adds, that with all theſe they ſhould retain a mighty pretence of acting from principle: *having a form of godlineſs, but denying the power thereof.* But how unaccountable ſoever this may ſeem in ſpeculation, it is common in fact. And we ſhall do well to enquire, both into the original and the extent of ſuch behaviour. For though remarks have been made upon ſome inſtances of it with ſufficient ſeverity, little attention hath been paid to others of almoſt equal importance: and yet we are charged to *turn away from* all who are guilty of them, as blameable and dangerous perſons.

The duty of man, though proceeding all from one ſource, naturally divides itſelf into religion and morals. Our underſtanding and our affections dictate to us the practice of both theſe: and both evidently promote our happineſs. But they promote it by ſuch exerciſes and reſtraints, as the inbred diſorder of our frame makes uneaſy, at the ſame time that it makes them neceſſary: and that injudicious tenderneſs for ourſelves, to which weak minds, as well as bodies are liable, creates in us a ſtrange averſion from entering upon a courſe, imagined to be ſtill harſher than it is, though eſſential to our welfare. Yet avowedly, to diſregard the obligations they are under,

under, would be too bold a ſtep for moſt men; who muſt therefore find out ſome middle way. And one ſuch way, a very obvious one, is diſſimulation: of which accordingly great uſe hath been made, to preſerve a ſhew both of piety and virtue. But while juſt notions of either prevail amongſt men, it will uſually coſt hypocrites more pains to gain credit, than would be needful to become in earneſt good: and after all, they but ſeldom fail of being ſeen through by others, and yet ſeldomer ſatisfy themſelves. Mere pretence therefore will not anſwer the purpoſe: there muſt be ſomething that hath the look, even to our own minds, of reality; ſome counterfeit of our duty, ſubſtituted inſtead of it, which we can miſtake for it. Were ſuch miſtakes involuntary, they would be guiltleſs: but the perſons deceived in this caſe, chooſe to deceive themſelves; which the vicious are both prone and able to do in a wonderful degree. Thus the voluptuous man takes up with preſent momentary gratifications for his real proper happineſs: and the artful man looks on the cunning, that only ſerves a ſhort-lived turn, as genuine wiſdom.

Now in juſt the ſame manner men have contrived to ſet up for religion, ſome, one thing, ſome, another: all which, though exceeding various, go under the general name of ſuperſtition. And ſeveral of theſe corruptions might have their firſt riſe merely from error in judgement or ignorance. But then ill deſign muſt have ſupported afterwards what otherwiſe good ſenſe would eaſily have corrected: and the main cauſe, why men had falſe notions of God and his worſhip, was, that, as the apoſtle obſerves, *they did not like to retain* the true *in their knowledge* *. It may ſeem an objection to this, that ſuperſtitious obſervances are often far more burthenſome, than *our reaſonable ſervice* †. But an evil heart thinks no grievance ſo heavy, as the exertion of good, and the mortification of ſinful diſpoſitions: beſides that, ways have been invented of lightening the other burthens, and reducing them commonly to a ſmall matter. No wonder then, that in all ages *forms of godliness without the power* took place: and being greatly diverſified, as different occaſions invited, have not only ſtood in the room of all that affectionate reverence, which men owe to God, but have often been ſuppoſed to compenſate for breaking the ſtrongeſt of

* Rom. i. 28. † Rom. xii. 1.

of thoſe ties, which bind them one to another. And thus to their comfort, they found themſelves at liberty in a great meaſure, to be at once in favour with heaven, and wicked.

Yet ſtill there was remaining in their breaſts a ſenſe of right and wrong in their behaviour towards their fellow-creatures, which the groſſeſt perverſions of religion could not quite extinguiſh; but it would from time to time break out, and be troubleſome. They could not therefore be completely eaſy, till this was quieted alſo: which accordingly they attempted by the ſame method that was uſed in the former caſe; debaſing, as there the natural awe of God, ſo here the natural approbation of virtuous conduct, into a ſpurious imitation of it. Good minds eſteem themſelves, and labour to be eſteemed by others, for acting an innocent and uſeful, and, if need be, a ſelf-denying part in the community of mankind. But bad ones, unwilling to purchaſe the applauſe of the world and their own ſo dear, dreſs themſelves up in falſe jewels, formed artfully to reſemble the true; are ſo dazzled and cheated with the blaze of theſe, that they overlook the inward deformities covered by them, and demand more reſpect from all around them, as perſons of diſtinction and merit, than the moſt truly valuable man upon earth doth: for he knows his imperfections, and *who hath made him to differ* [*].

Thus then the form without the power, though much oftener cenſured in religion, is perhaps as frequent, and as miſchievous in morality. Some have corrupted the former with injurious notions of God, with abſurd modes of honouring him, with ſchemes of being pious, conſiſtent with living impiouſly. And others in like manner have corrupted the latter with chimerical imaginations, with pernicious rules of life, with vain contrivances to be men of worth, notwithſtanding a conduct in many inſtances notoriouſly unworthy. And theſe depravations correſpond entirely the one to the other. Only the ſubſtitutes for true religion, though widely different, are moſt, if not all of them, comprehended under the term ſuperſtition; by which name they have been plentifully expoſed: and the ſubſtitutes for true morals not having been collected into a body, with a general denomination affixed to them, the abuſes introduced by their means have eſcaped with ſlighter notice. The moſt extenſive

[*] 1 Cor. iv. 7.

extensive word for them perhaps is, false honour; which therefore, as I proceed, I shall commonly use in speaking of them: yet it by no means includes the whole; for false good-nature, a different thing, is perpetually cried up, to serve just the same purpose. But however impossible it may be to find an adequate expression, the fact is clear; that counterfeits of virtue, as well as piety, have been sought out, with a bad design, and too successfully.

These in some breasts, dwell together amicably: either so adapted to each other, as to join in approving the same actions; or governing by turns when they differ, and dividing life between them: in which last case, if what calls itself religion chance to be offended by any enormous piece of iniquity, some sacrifice is made to it, in acknowledgment of its superior right; and after it is thus appeased, all goes on as before, through the gay and flourishing part of mens days at least. But some persons, on the contrary, impatient after a while under the least restraints from it, throw it off entirely, and profess honour alone for the rule; on the dignity of which valuing themselves beyond measure, they not only laugh at superstition with very superior airs, but depreciate all regard to God, as no better than superstition. Now as it would be very unjust for a man of good morals to despise religion; because these two systems are not only both true, but indeed the same truth: so it is quite ridiculous for the man of mere honour to despise superstition; because these two are not only both false, but in effect the same falsehood. They both proceed, as you have seen already, from the same unfairness and inconsiderateness: and if we go on to examine their features more distinctly, we shall see the nearness of their relation still more fully: it will appear that each depraves equally a natural and good principle in the heart; that in each the depravation is brought about, by first exalting too highly some one or few things, to the disparagement of others of no less merit, and then carrying the favourite point so far, as turns it quickly into folly, and soon after into wickedness; yet all under colour of acting from the noblest motives imaginable. These things I shall endeavour to prove and apply.

That each is the depravation of an originally right principle in our hearts appears undeniably. Were not the reverence

of an inviſible ſuperior founded in nature, it could neither have prevailed ſo univerſally, nor ſtood its ground ſo firmly, againſt all the ſophiſtry, with which unbelievers have attacked it, and under all that load of abſurdities, which bigots have heaped upon it. Again: were there not ſomething eſſentially honourable and worthy, viſionary ideas of worth and honour could not have obtained and ſupported themſelves amongſt men. So that indeed the very abuſes, which are objected to religion and virtue, will, if duly conſidered, amount to proofs of them. No error can take deep root and ſpread far, without aſſuming a likeneſs to ſome truth, from which it ſeems to ſpring. And the primitive likeneſs muſt be a pretty ſtrong one: but after a while, the likeneſs of that likeneſs may take its place, and by degrees all be changed into a contrary appearance! juſt as by fetching a large compaſs perſons may ſeem to walk ſtraight forward, till their faces are turned the oppoſite way.

The firſt ſtep of this progreſs is uſually fixing the thoughts and affections very intenſely upon ſome one part of duty. And this, men argue, is being concerned for what they ought. But if this engage us too much, other objects, intitled to our attention, muſt go without their due ſhare, even were we deſirous they ſhould have it. But if we had rather forget them, and make amends for it by paying a double regard to what we like better, there are no degrees of neglect to which we may not thus run. Every one obſerves, that in religion men ſet their whole hearts on ſome darling ſpeculation or practice, and utterly overlook whatever elſe they pleaſe. Now juſt the ſame thing happens in morals; and ſeveral of the inſtances coincide. As there are ſome, who place their religious character in performing certain rites and keeping certain rules of outward ſanctity, without the leaſt concern about any ſuch temper and conduct, as thoſe rites and rules were deſigned to expreſs and promote: ſo do others put their moral character, if it may be called ſuch, on little external proprieties and decencies of behaviour, which they would on no account violate, yet have no ſcruple of trampling upon the moſt important ſocial obligations; will be guilty of the greateſt injuſtice, but not for the world commit an incivility; and while in ſome caſes they moſt rigidly obſerve the niceſt punctilios, will in

others diſguiſe the vileſt perfidiouſneſs with the meaneſt hypocriſy. Again: the whole piety of many lies in a vehement zeal to have ſuch things publicly profeſſed, as either they do not believe, or at leaſt will not practiſe: and the whole virtue of others conſiſts in extravagant talk, meant to propagate high notions of rectitude and intellectual beauty, and harmonious affections, which have ſcarce the leaſt influence on them beyond words. Again: ſome have narrowed their chriſtian charity almoſt into the ſingle act of almſgiving to the poor, on the ſtrength of which they will venture, not only to be uncharitable in many ways to whomſoever elſe they will, but poſſibly diſhoneſt, intemperate, diſſolute beſides. And others have ſhrunk their boaſted benevolence into a partial good-nature, arbitrarily exerted or withheld, and ſhewn chiefly perhaps on occaſions very ill choſen; from which they claim allowance to be as inhumanly barbarous in other caſes as they pleaſe, and as profane and debauched as they can. In ſhort, men turn their pretences to morals into almoſt nothing, juſt as they do their pretences to religion: and in both they proceed, ſometimes by faſhion and cuſtom, ſometimes by mere inclination or humour. To ſome things they adhere firmly without any reaſon, others they ſlight contemptuouſly, though grounded on the ſtrongeſt reaſons. And thus, on both ſides, attachment to truth and duty is gradually effaced: till, as the one ſort can be very pious with as little true religion, as they think proper; ſo the other can be perſons of honour, with a very ſmall ſhare of any ſingle good quality. Indeed it is pitiable to ſee what wretched poor remnants of principle ſuch men have at laſt to pride themſelves upon, and dignify with pompous names.

Nor do both ſorts agree only in this firſt ſtep, of exalting ſome favourite article to the undue depreſſion of others, but in the ſecond, of carrying it to ſuch lengths, as turn it into folly, and afterwards into wickedneſs.

For as ſuperſtition preſſes the obligation of many things further than religion requires; ſo doth falſe honour, beyond the precepts of morality: and ſtrange refinements are adopted, by the one in the ſervice of God, and by the other in the intercourſes of common life, which neither divine nor human wiſdom can poſſibly approve. But further: as ſuperſtition ſometimes obliges men to tranſgreſs the rules of virtue; ſo doth falſe honour very frequently oblige them to tranſgreſs the rules

of religion. And indeed the ſuperſtitious man, to do him juſtice, though he is very apt to look down upon morality as a low attainment, yet in general doth think it one of ſome value: but the mere man of honour takes religion to be downright meanneſs; and at the ſame time that he will pay the moſt ſervile court to an earthly ſuperior, thinks all expreſſions of duty to the Lord and King of heaven and earth much beneath him: or though inwardly he thinks otherwiſe, yet the cowardly fear of making an ill figure amongſt his brethren drives him to the abſurd bravery of daring to affront God, though it be with a guilty conſcience, and an aching heart. Further: as the ſuperſtitious man holds thoſe in contempt who obſerve only the common rules of piety; ſo doth the man of falſe honour thoſe who confine themſelves to the common rules of virtue. And as the extravagances of the one make religion deſpiſed, and tempt men to run into profaneneſs; ſo do the wildneſſeſs of the other make virtue laughed at, and tempt men to run into profligacy. If ſuperſtition contradicts, and then to ſcreen itſelf, undervalues reaſon: ſtill the fierceſt bigot, or moſt frantic enthuſiaſt, cannot have leſs regard to reaſon, or more abſolutely refuſe to be tried by it, than the man of falſe honour. Nor can the former pay a more irrational worſhip to his deity, than the other pays, and requires that every body elſe ſhould pay, to himſelf. Further yet: men of religion and virtue are humble and diffident, candid and mild: but devotees to the ſhadow of each, are always haughty and poſitive, ſuſpicious and ready to take offence. And when they do take offence, the hotteſt zealot cannot eaſily be more miſchievous in God's cauſe, than the man of honour thinks himſelf bound to be in his own. If the religion, that torments, and ſheds blood to propagate faith, be cruel and deteſtable; the honour, that ravages and depopulates nations to extend glory, deſerves no ſofter epithets. If ſuperſtition, on ſmall pretences, enliſts men into parties, bitter againſt one another, and hurtful to ſociety; falſe honour, on grounds as inconſiderable raiſes factions equally pernicious; and exacts the ſame perſeverance in adhering to, and going every length with, the ſide once choſen, whatever riſque the whole may run by it. If ſuperſtition in ſome caſes teaches men to ſtick at no wickedneſs, under penalty of loſing God's favour; ſo doth falſe honour in others, under that of forfeiting

ſuiting the eſteem of what is called the world. And if the former gives men hopes of eſcaping the anger of heaven for many known ſins by zeal for ſome imagined duty; the latter helps them to evade the condemnation of their own hearts for many baſe actions, by encouraging them to pique themſelves on ſome one point of merit, which perhaps after all hath little or no merit in it. And thus, as under the influence of ſuperſtition, all ſenſe of true religion fades away; ſo doth all ſenſe of true virtue under that of mere honour: till at laſt the meaning of this big word is become ſo little that a man ſhall claim, and be allowed, a title to it, with ever ſo few good qualities, and ever ſo many bad ones; provided he dares but venture his life to be revenged of thoſe who ſhall aſcribe to him any of the latter ſort, which he doth not care to acknowledge.

The vileſt ſuperſtition cannot poſſibly have depraved the heart more, than ſuch honour: nor uſually are its ill impreſſions ſo hard to change for better. And therefore though a ſtate of corrupt religion be doubtleſs a deplorable one; yet that is ſtill worſe and more immediately bordering upon ruin, when all reverence for God being avowedly renounced, and all concern for virtue in reality extinguiſhed, the ſingle direction left for human behaviour, the only principle profeſſed to keep men from being abandoned throughout, is an airy notion, which will eaſily aſſume any ſhape to ſerve any purpoſe, that they pleaſe; or vaniſh at command, when it can ſerve none. It ſhould be added, that as ſuperſtition is a much wickeder thing, for corrupting religion under pretence of highly reſpecting it; ſo is falſe honour, for corrupting morals under the colour of refining and exalting them. And the latter corruptions are the leſs excuſable of the two, as they can hardly in ſo great a degree, proceed from miſtake: ſince the duties, that we owe one to another muſt be conſiderably more obvious to our apprehenſions, than ſuch as flow from the relations in which we ſtand to our heavenly Father, his Son and Holy Spirit.

Upon the whole, I hope it is evident, that theſe two characters are in many particulars directly alike, that where they are oppoſite, they have this likeneſs ſtill, that one is as far removed from truth as the other: but that in the point before

before us they perpetually agree: that is, in being ſpecious *forms* and appearances of the two moſt valuable things in the world, without having *the power* and ſubſtance of either: in obſcuring by this fallacious reſemblance that knowledge of their duty, which by reaſon and revelation God hath given to men, and making *the light that is in them darkneſs* *.

Yet, notwithſtanding all that hath been ſaid, I muſt beg you to obſerve, that both ſuperſtition may be ſo ſpoken againſt as to depreciate piety; and honour ſo as to depreciate virtue. What many delight to repeat, as a maxim without exception, that ſuperſtition is worſe than having no religion at all, may be true in ſome caſes: juſt as it may in others, that falſe honour is worſe than having no rule of conduct. But ſince either of theſe may prevail in a very ſmall and nearly harmleſs degree, or in a great and pernicious one; to conclude the higheſt and the loweſt under the ſame condemnation, and make him who doth no worſe than load the foundation of truth with a few ungraceful ſuperſtructures, equally guilty with ſuch as would overturn it, is either the groſſeſt unfairneſs, or the moſt pitiable want of judgement. Religion and virtue naturally produce the happieſt effects. Erroneous notions in either tend, always to weaken thoſe effects, often to produce the contrary: and therefore it ſhould be the conſtant buſineſs of wiſe and good men to weed them out of human minds; but with the utmoſt caution; *leſt while the tares are gathered, the wheat alſo be rooted up with them* †. And they, who manifeſt no feeling of this danger, have either a worſe intention than they own, or a zeal guided by very little prudence.

Therefore the uſe to be made of this diſcourſe is, not that the enormities of ſuperſtitious men ſhould bring piety into diſgrace, or thoſe of the votaries of falſe honour make true honour deemed a phantom: not that either of theſe defective and faulty characters ſhould keep themſelves in countenance by inveighing againſt the defects and faults of the other; but that both labour ſeriouſly to ſupply and correct their own, and ſo become ſuch in deed, as they are now only in imagination. For if our Maker demand any obedience from his rational

* Matth. vi. 23. † Matth. xiii. 29.

tional creatures, it muſt be paid to his whole will, however made known: and if we are under any ties of ſocial behaviour or ſelf-government, we are bound to whatever is juſt and fit. All genuine religion leads to virtue: all genuine virtue to religion: *what therefore God hath joined together, let no man put aſunder**: but let all unite in the practice of both, as preſcribed in the goſpel. For there and there only they will find, (what ſtrongly demonſtrates its heavenly origin) a blameleſs and perfect inſtitution of duty, without any mixture of what is wrong, or any omiſſion of what is right. *Thanks be unto God for his unſpeakable gift*†.

* Matth. xix. 6. Mark x. 9. † 2 Cor. ix. 15.

SER-

SERMON LXXVI.

The Period of Christ's Appearance in the World, the Most Proper in the Wisdom of God.

Gal. iv. 4.

When the fulneſs of the time was come, God ſent forth his Son.

THE redemption of mankind from ſin and miſery by the incarnation and death of Chriſt was on God's part, entirely a matter of mere grace and favour. It depended wholly on his free choice, whether he would ſend a Saviour into the world at all: much more at what time he would. We have therefore no claim, but what is founded on his voluntary promiſes. Theſe indeed, when they were given, he was bound to make good. And as ſome of them not only aſſured the world of ſuch a perſon's coming, but fixed the time of it; ſo accordingly he came at the time fixed. It had been foretold in ſcripture, that he ſhould appear under the fourth of the great empires of the world*; whilſt the ſecond houſe, or temple of the *Jews* was in being†; when *the ſceptre was departing from Judah*‡; at the end of ſo many weeks after their return from the captivity§, each conſiſting, not of ſeven days, but of ſeven years. And in fact, juſt when all theſe marks were viſibly united, *Jeſus came into Galilee, preaching and ſaying, the time is fulfilled; and the kingdom of God is at hand: Repent ye, and believe the goſpel*‖.

The fulneſs of time therefore, mentioned by the apoſtle in the text, which he calls *the appointed time of the Father* two verſes

* Dan. ii. 44. † Hag. ii. 9. ‡ Gen. xlix. 10.
§ Dan. ix. 25. 26. ‖ Mark i. 14, 15.

verſes before, ſo plainly that which the ſcripture prophecies point out and determine. And this being kept to, as it was with great exactneſs; reaſonable and conſiderate men, if the world were made up of ſuch only, would have little farther left to do in the matter, than to acknowledge, with due admiration, that *known unto God are all his works from the beginning**. Still, modeſt inquiries may undoubtedly be made, why a bleſſing of ſo great importance was delayed ſo long. If reaſons can be found, pious minds will rejoice in them; if not, they will eaſily be ſatisfied, that God can ſee better and farther, than his creatures.

† But the captious and the arrogant, they who muſt either underſtand every thing, or will believe nothing, have, it ſeems, inſuperable difficulties on this head: and the one point of our Saviour's coming no ſooner, is enough with them to deſtroy his whole claim without looking farther into it. For they ſay, if either his inſtructions or his death, were of ſuch conſequence, as chriſtians imagine; why was not the world bleſſed with them immediately? Where was the goodneſs, where was the wiſdom, of deferring till 1700 years ago, what, if it was neceſſary at all, was equally neceſſary long before. If their own reaſon was a ſufficient guide to men, there was no need of his ever coming to teach them: if it was not, he ought to have ſupplied the defects of it many ages ſooner.

Now to theſe objections it would be anſwer enough, that God having borne teſtimony of chriſtianity, firſt by prophecies evidently fulfilled, then by miracles unqueſtionably performed; it is a much more concluſive argument, that for theſe reaſons, it certainly came from him, and therefore came at a proper time, than that, according to our notions, it did not come at a proper time, and therefore did not come from him. Of plain facts well atteſted, and plain concluſions drawn from them, we are

* Acts xv. 18.

† *Celſ.* in *Orig.* l. 6. §. 78. objects: why ſo late? Why into ſuch a corner? He ſhould have animated many bodies, and been ſent into different parts of the world. *Origen* anſwers, that he entered before his incarnation into all that lived well: that he muſt appear in a nation owning one God, and having prophecies of his coming, and at a time when his doctrine could ſpread*: that one Chriſt, as one ſun, was enough for the world; and if not, all chriſtians are members of his body.

* On which point alſo he inſiſts, l. 2. § 30. ſhewing the advantage of his appearing when the world was in peace, under one great empire.

competent judges. But for creatures who have only a very imperfect acquaintance with a very ſmall part of the world, for a very few years, to think of preſcribing, by what ſteps the allwiſe God muſt conduct the affairs of it: and at what period he is bound to do this thing and that, if he doth it at all; is ſuch amazing preſumption, as no degree of ignorant boldneſs in deciding about the higheſt points of earthly knowledge, makes any approach to: and were it carried on to its full length, it muſt end in downright atheiſm.

For ſuppoſe a new ſet of objectors ſhould ariſe, and argue againſt the creation, as theſe do againſt the redemption, of man: ſhould aſk, if a good and wiſe being made the world for our happineſs, why he made it no ſooner; why he did not make us at once as happy, as we could be; why at leaſt the conveniencies of life, the remedies for diſeaſes, the ſeveral parts of uſeful and entertaining knowledge were not diſcovered to us immediately; why the extraordinary perſons, who in various ways have enlightened and benefited the world, were ſent into it ſo late, and not at the very firſt; where was the goodneſs, where was the wiſdom, of deferring ſo many things till theſe later ages; which, if they were wanted at all, were equally wanted long before? Could any other anſwer be given in defence of natural religion, than hath been given juſt now in defence of the goſpel; that God knows beſt the proper time of every thing. Let theſe objectors therefore chuſe, whether they will ſtand by their objection, and be atheiſts; or give it up, and be chriſtians.

But to ſupply them with ſome inducements to chuſe right, and give you ſome further ſatisfaction in ſo material a point, it will be uſeful to conſider our bleſſed Lord's coming,

I. With regard to thoſe who lived before it; and

II. With relation to thoſe who lived after it.

From thence it will appear, that his coming, when he did, was no hardſhip to the former: and an unſpeakable advantage to the latter: and therefore was well and wiſely appointed.

I. That his coming, when he did, was no hardſhip to thoſe who lived before it. For though his perſonal appearance was late, yet that doth not hinder, but the earlieſt ages may have been greatly the happier for it: We learn indeed from ſcripture, that *there is no ſalvation in any other**. But we learn alſo,

* Acts iv. 12.

alſo, that the ſalvation, procured by him, extends from the beginning of time to the end of it: that *as in Adam all die, even ſo in Chriſt ſhall all be made alive**: that good perſons in the firſt ages, as well as in the following, were redeemed by his blood, who being fore-ordained from eternity, to be *manifeſted in due time*†, is therefore, in reſpect of the efficacy of his death, *the Lamb ſlain from the foundation of the world*‡. The reality of this efficacy we hope we are well able to defend, whenever that ſhall be the point in queſtion. But in the mean time this is very evident, that whatever motive the view of his ſufferings, when paſt, could offer to God for being gracious to men, the foreſight of the ſame ſufferings, covenanted for in time to come, muſt be an equal motive: for a good ſecurity is, to all intents, equivalent to an actual payment. And therefore the death of our Saviour, when he did die, was juſt as beneficial, as it poſſibly could have been, ever ſo much earlier. And as we firmly believe that it was highly beneficial to many, who truſted in God's mercy, with a very obſcure knowledge of him: ſo we are far from denying, that it may have been beneficial to many others, who truſted in the ſame mercy, without any preſent knowledge of him at all.

We do indeed maintain, that human reaſon, unaſſiſted by divine revelation, is an inſufficient guide in matters of religion, But inſufficient for what purpoſe? Not inſufficient to ſhew the means of eſcaping future miſery. If it were, ſince multitudes have never had any other guide, they muſt be miſerable unavoidably, and God unjuſt in making them ſo. But we ſay it is inſufficient, in its very nature, to give men that degree of knowledge and goodneſs, and conſequently that future happineſs, which the faith of Chriſt can give: and that it hath proved inſufficient in fact, to give any one nation in the world any conſiderable degree of knowledge and goodneſs at all: nay, to preſerve any one nation from being overwhelmed with groſs ignorance and wickedneſs. That the heathen part of the world hath been thus ignorant and wicked, unbelievers themſelves muſt acknowledge. And if it be an argument againſt the chriſtian ſcheme, that nothing was done ſooner to relieve them: how much ſtronger an argument is it againſt *their* ſcheme, that,

* 1 Cor. xv. 22. † Tit. i. 2, 3. ‡ Rev. xiii. 8.

according to that, nothing is yet, or ever will be, done to relieve them? We teach, that God ſent his Son to reform the world, when he ſaw it a proper time: they teach, that he hath ſent no one at any time: and which bears hardeſt upon his goodneſs and wiſdom? Undoubtedly they will ſay, that God makes due allowances for the diſadvantages men are under. Why we ſay the very ſame thing: and why is not the plea as good in our mouths, as in theirs? Much better indeed; becauſe we think unaſſiſted reaſon, could hardly, if at all, teach men, ſeveral truths, which they think it could not fail to teach them: and therefore, as unaffected ignorance is always an excuſe for faults, unbelievers, if they will be conſiſtent with themſelves, muſt paſs a harder ſentence on the heathen world, than chriſtians have ground to do.

But not only the generality of the world, before Chriſt, were poſſeſſed of this advantage on our ſcheme; but a conſiderable part of it enjoyed, what might have been, if they would, a much greater; and as they wanted ſupernatural inſtruction, ſo they had it. Revelations were made, as ſoon as ever they became needful, firſt to *Adam*, then to *Noah*, then to *Abraham*: each of whom doubtleſs communicated them to their deſcendants. Now the deſcendants of the two former were all mankind; and of the laſt, ſeveral great nations. Then afterwards, that aſtoniſhing delivery of the law on mount *Sinai* to the *Jews*, preceded by ſuch miracles in *Egypt*, followed by ſo many more in *Canaan*, and made the foundation of a large commonwealth, profeſſing faith in one only God, the Maker of heaven and earth, was a ſtanding declaration of true religion firſt to all the countries in their neighbourhood, then to all the countries in which they were captives or diſperſed, till the very time of our Saviour's appearance. The effects of theſe things, though much leſs than they might have been, were however conſiderable; perhaps the chief foundation of all the true religion which the Gentiles had. And how much leſs worthy of the divine goodneſs is the doctrine of unbelievers, that man was totally abandoned by his Maker to ignorance and ſin; than ours, that interpoſitions from above in his favour were thus often vouchſafed? And how greatly do theſe leſſen the difficulty, concerning our Saviour's coming ſo late; eſpecially if we add farther, what the word of God much more than intimates,

intimates, that all the ſupernatural inſtructions which the world had from the earlieſt times, were given for his ſake, and through his means. Nay, were we to ſay farther yet, that he gave perſonally the chief of them; and appeared many times for this purpoſe, before he appeared in the fleſh: it would be nothing more, than ſcripture makes probable, and learned and judicious chriſtians in all ages have believed.

Since therefore the world had no right at all to any revelation of God's will, and yet partook of it thus from the firſt; they were by no means hardly treated, in not having the fulleſt manifeſtation of it ſooner. Nay, indeed, there muſt be ſomething peculiarly pleaſing to good men amongſt the *Jews*, in that gradual increaſe of light, which was imparted to them, brighteaing on continually towards perfect day. And every pious mind, in every place, had one advantage, even from the obſcurity which encompaſſed them; that they could exerciſe a more acceptable truſt in the divine promiſes, while they were leſs explicit: and entitle themſelves to a greater bleſſedneſs, for doing ſo much, while they ſaw in compariſon ſo little.

Still we own, that, upon the whole, they had not equal privileges with us; and yet we hold *that God is no reſpecter of perſons* *: that is, he never makes unjuſt or unreaſonable diſtinctions: but that he makes very often ſuch as we cannot ſee the reaſon for, is as evident in the daily courſe of nature and providence, as in the doctrine of revelation. It is moſt viſible, that God withholds many bleſſings, conducive to virtue and piety, as well as to temporal happineſs, from ſome perſons, ſome nations, and ſome ages, which yet he beſtows on others: and why then might he not withhold, from the ages before Chriſt, the advantages, which thoſe after him receive from his coming, even though we could not ſhew, what end was anſwered by that method of proceeding? But indeed we can ſhew many valuable ones: as I ſhall now proceed to do, under the

IId head propoſed, which is: that his appearing ſo late, as it was no injury to the preceding times, was a great benefit to the following. For by that means, chriſtianity was capable, both of being proved more clearly, and ſpread through the world more eaſily, and fixed in it more laſtingly.

Had

* Acts x. 34.

Had our Saviour appeared in the early ages, there had been little or no room for a number of prophecies concerning him beforehand. Or if there had, it would have been difficult, if not impoſſible, to prove afterwards, that ſuch prophecies were made a ſufficient time before the event. And thus one kind of evidence of his authority, and a very ſtrong one, muſt have been intirely loſt.

And for the other evidence, that of miracles: had Chriſt come and performed his, only a thouſand or two of years earlier than he did; they who object now to his coming no ſooner, how much more would they have objected in that caſe to his coming ſo ſoon; in a period of time, when men were ignorant and unexperienced, credulous and unſuſpicious, and beſides incapable of conveying down to us with any certainty what paſſed amongſt them? Indeed as it is, are not ſome ready to ſay or imagine, though very unjuſtly, that the credit of the goſpel hiſtory is leſs for its being ſo ancient; and wearing out continually, as time runs on? What would they have ſaid then, if the time had been twice as long? Very poſſibly, there might have been little need for them to ſay any thing: almoſt, if not quite, every ray of truth might have been loſt in the thickneſs of the medium, through which it was to paſs; and at beſt the Son of God might have appeared no otherwiſe, than as one of the fabulous heroes of pagan antiquity. Now indeed, having a ſeries of revelations down to his days, the latter part atteſting and confirming the former, we have ſufficient ground to rely firmly on the earlieſt. But had the whole been cloſed when the firſt was given, the proof of it muſt have been much weaker.

Nay, had he come in the mid-way, between thoſe times, and that when he did: in what ſtate would he have found the world? He would have found the *Jews*, far from being capable of ſo ſpiritual a religion as his, not ſufficiently reſtrained by all the fetters, and all the pomp, of their own ceremonial one, from groſs idolatry; and therefore plainly, as the apoſtle obſerves, in the condition of *children*, wanting to be kept longer *under tutors and governors, and the elements* of their law, till they ſhould come to be of age for a ſtate of freedom [a]. Beſides, they were hitherto little known in the world; and as chriſtianity,

[a] Gal. iv. 1, 2, 3.

chriſtianity, for many reaſons, was to have its riſe in that nation, the proper time for its riſe was certainly, not till their teſtimony to the prophecies and facts on which it was built, could reach farther, and have more effect.

Then as to the Gentiles, the darkneſs they were in, till a ſmall time before our Saviour's appearance, was much too great for them to bear the light of the ſun, breaking out upon them at once. Or had it not, they were divided into numbers of ſmall kingdoms and ſtates, continually at war. The communication of a religion, from one to another of theſe, would have been extremely difficult: and neither miracles, nor inſtructions, could eaſily have reached far. Jealouſies would have ariſen, that political purpoſes of one againſt another were deſigned to be ſerved by it: ſome ſuch perhaps would have been grafted upon it. One nation would have favoured and eſtabliſhed the new ſcheme; another rejected and calumniated it: and by theſe conteſts every part of its evidence, and eſpecially that great one, the diſintereſtedneſs of its teachers, would have become ſo doubtful, that many conſiderate men would ſcarce have known what to think of it.

Beſides, had our bleſſed Lord's inſtructions been given much earlier; after-times would never have known ſufficiently the need they had of them: but would have imagined, that, in a little while, men would have found out of themſelves, every thing which he had taught them. Even now, after the experience of ſo many ages: the contrary, ſome tell us, that the whole of religion, of all we have to believe and do, to hope or fear, is ſo plain, that no one could ever miſs it. How much more plauſibly then would they have ſaid ſo, and indeed how much fainter a ſenſe ſhould we all have had of our obligations to Chriſt: if the moſt enlightened parts of the world, had not, before his coming, wandered ſo long in ſuperſtition and ſin?

Nor is this farther conſideration without its weight: that, had our Saviour come and delivered the precepts of Chriſtianity in their full purity and ſtrictneſs, before the light of nature had been ſufficiently improved, by a few of the heathens, to diſcern and own the juſtneſs of them: what is ſtill ſaid by ſome, would then have been ſaid by many more: that they were utterly too rigid for the nature and circumſtances of man;

man; and unfit to be required of ſuch creatures, as we are.

But now, inſtead of all theſe inconveniences, the oppoſite advantages are happily obtained, only by waiting. till *the fulneſs of time was come.* By this prudent delay, the *Jews* were ſo far prepared for his reception, as they were reclaimed from idolatry: and therefore the *Moſaic* law, which had been made to keep them from it, might be ſafely laid aſide. Some of them were grown ſuperſtitiouſly fond of the legal ceremonies: theſe it was time to enlighten. Others were longing for that better ſtate of things, which the prophets had foretold: theſe it was time to bleſs with the conſolation they waited for. The expectation, which they both had of the Meſſiah, would excite a great attention to the Holy Jeſus: and yet the too common opinion, that he was to appear as a temporal prince, would ſufficiently keep them from being partial in his favour, ſince he appeared in a manner ſo different. Their government was ſtill in being, and their laws in uſe, for thoſe, who would, to examine into: their countrymen were ſpread through a great part of the earth, to make the examination eaſier: their ſacred books had been ſome time before tranſlated into *Greek*, the commoneſt language then in the world, for every one's peruſal. By theſe means, they and their religion were well enough known, eaſily to afford all needful information; yet by no means well enough liked, to prejudice men in favour of any new doctrine, that ſhould proceed from them. Nor could men be prejudiced through them, on the ſide of chriſtianity: for though they bore a conſiderable teſtimony to it, yet moſt part of them did it againſt their wills; ſince, though many of them believed in Chriſt, the generality did not.

This condition of the *Jews* undoubtedly made the *Gentiles* much better judges, of our Saviour's claim, than they could have been, had he appeared before. And as to their own condition; learning and philoſophy had flouriſhed amongſt them for ſome ages; but was then become more univerſal, than ever. It had freed the minds of many from the eſtabliſhed ſuperſtitions. It had taught a few the reaſonableneſs of ſome of the ſtricteſt precepts, which our Saviour afterwards delivered. And in theſe reſpects it had very happily made way for his doctrine. But it had been far from accompliſhing any general reformation,

tion, even of opinions, in the world. The heathen morality was founded on ſpeculation, too abſtracted for the bulk of mankind; was fitted rather to confound them by endleſs diſputes, than teach them any thing ſolid to reſt upon: indeed, to ſay the truth, it was never propoſed to them or taught them publicly, but confined to the ſchools of philoſophers. Nay, it had not convinced even them of many moſt important truths; or of the duty of profeſſing honeſtly the important truths, of which they *were* convinced: for they all conformed to the eſtabliſhed idolatries. Now theſe things plainly ſhewed, that reaſon alone would never make known ſo much of religion, as men had need to know; and therefore revelation was infinitely deſireable. Yet at the ſame time, no age before had ever been ſo unlikely to embrace a falſe revelation, as that was. The improvement of knowledge had thoroughly enabled them to diſtinguiſh between truth and impoſture: the many cheats of paganiſm had put them on their guard: the prevailing ſect of the times was the *Epicurean*, which believed nothing of religion. And even the prevailing wickedneſs of the times would be ſure to keep men from admitting, too haſtily, a religion, ſo ſtrictly virtuous, as the Chriſtian; and indeed, to diſcourage any, that were cunning enough to be deceivers, from ever hoping to impoſe by artifice and fraud ſuch a ſet of precepts on ſuch an age. Had it been one of as great ſimplicity of manners, as ſome of the foregoing; it might have been pretended, that the goodneſs of the morality of the goſpel had made its other doctrines paſs without evidence. But to require of a generation, ſo extremely vicious, what had never been required of man before, an abſolute denial of every wrong inclination of every kind, was a full proof of honeſty in the teachers: and, if they prevailed, a ſtrong preſumption of the truth of what they taught. Now we know they did prevail. And as, without the leaſt learning, they delivered a ſublimer and purer religion; ſo, without the leaſt worldly help, they produced, in a few years, a greater reformation, than all the wit and power of man had ever been able to do before: of both which arguments chriſtianity muſt have been deprived, had God revealed it, before philoſophy and human policy, had tried their own ſtrength.

But further yet, when our Saviour appeared, and ſcarce till then, the greateſt part of the known world was peaceably ſettled under one empire, that of the *Romans*. On which account, men were much more at leiſure for attending to a new religion: travelling and ſending intelligence was much more commodious: chriſtianity therefore was eaſily propagated; and its proofs as eaſily examined. Beſides this, its being perſecuted ſo ſoon, and ſo long, through the whole of that vaſt dominion, ſhewed its profeſſors to have no worldly intereſt in view: which they poſſibly might, if the ſame extent of country had ſtill been divided amongſt different princes; one of whom perhaps would have protected them againſt another. And their getting the better, by mere argument and patience, of this moſt formidable power, was a ſtrong proof, that truth, and the God of truth, was their ſupport. To which it muſt be added, that the ſcene of this noble ſtruggle being at the ſame time the ſeat of learning, we have a ſufficient account of it handed down to us from the firſt, both by friends and enemies: whereas in the more ignorant countries, where chriſtianity was taught, (and the obſervation is greatly to its honour) it either could not get footing, or could not keep it; and where it laſted longeſt, little or no hiſtory of it remains.

Theſe advantages then our religion had, from not being publiſhed till the age, in which it was. If any former might poſſibly be as proper in ſome reſpects, yet none will be found ſo proper in all. And if what hath been ſaid hath only weight enough to remove an objection againſt the goſpel, no more is neceſſary. But I hope it will be thought a powerful circumſtance in its favour, that the time of its promulgation was ſo evidently the right one. And I hope alſo, that conſiderate men will take occaſion from this inſtance to reflect, that in others too the ways of God may be very juſt and wiſe, where perhaps, on a haſty view, they may ſeem very exceptionable.

But I muſt not conclude without adding, that the care, with which our Saviour choſe for our ſakes the fitteſt ſeaſon of coming, ſhould make us very careful for our own ſakes to be fit for receiving him. The whole benefit to us of what he did then, depends intirely on what we ſhall do at preſent: and all he hath gone through to help and ſave us, will only increaſe our miſery, if we neglect to help ourſelves, by performing, (through the

the means which he hath procured for us) all the duties of a godly, righteous and sober life, in the constant expectation of his coming again. Permit me therefore to conclude in the apostle's words. *We then, as workers together with him, beseech you, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time: behold, now is the day of salvation* *.

* 2 Cor. vi. 1, 2.

SERMON LXXVII.

The Danger of Unbelief, and the Advantages of Rational Faith.

JOHN xx. 29.

Jeſus ſaith unto him, Thomas, becauſe thou haſt ſeen me, thou haſt believed: bleſſed are they, that have not ſeen, and yet have believed.

THESE words relate to the ſtrange unwillingneſs of one of the apoſtles to admit the teſtimony of our Saviour's reſurrection. And there is ſomething ſo remarkable and inſtructive in the account, which the evangeliſts give, not only of the behaviour of St. *Thomas* in the ſingle inſtance before us, but of the whole behaviour of the various perſons concerned in the hiſtory of our bleſſed Lord, and eſpecially in the concluding part of it, that I ſhall deſire your attention a while to that matter in general, before I proceed to our apoſtle's caſe in particular.

Throughout the goſpels, the characters of all who appear in them, though very unlike each to the other, and ſome of them, very uncommon, are drawn ſo agreeably to nature, and preſented ſo conſiſtent; (while yet the writers plainly uſe no art on the occaſion, and indeed were incapable of uſing it to any purpoſe) that a conſiderate perſon, without farther evidence, muſt conceive the deſcriptions to be taken from the life. Supernatural things indeed, of the moſt amazing kind, are intermixed. But then the cauſe was worthy of them in the higheſt degree: and all the mere human part of the narration, if I may call it by that name, is ſo entirely free from any thing forced and romantic, and repreſents the heads and hearts of men working ſo exactly as they do in fact work, yet ſo differently from what the unſkilful would be apt to expect from them, that it very

very ſtrongly confirms the truth of all that is related. I ſhall ſpecify only ſuch proofs of this point, as occur in the ſhort ſtory of our Saviour's death and return to life.

The picture, which we have there, of the bigotry and ſuperſtition of the *Jews*, how aſtoniſhing is it, and yet, how juſt! zealous profeſſors of a religion which prefers juſtice and mercy to all things; yet incited by that very zeal to the groſſeſt violations of both: abhorring from principle the *Roman* power; yet making it in form their charge againſt the meek and lowly Jeſus, that he was dangerous to that power: determined to have his life, though viſibly innocent; ſuborning falſe witneſſes; raiſing tumults for that wicked end: yet much too ſcrupulous to go into the judgement-hall, leſt they ſhould be defiled, and made unfit to eat the paſſover. At the ſame time, *Pilate*, the *Roman* governor, appears in quite another light: a perfectly natural one indeed for a man of the world: but which plain country people, and ſuch the firſt believers were, would never have placed him in, from their own invention. Contemptuouſly indifferent about the religious accuſations brought againſt the priſoner: very clear, that the political ones were groundleſs, and therefore in earneſt deſirous to ſave him: but however, making a compliment of him at all adventures to *Herod*, the moment that he had hopes it might reconcile, as it did, a powerful enemy; and ready without heſitation to crucify him, rather than run the hazard of not being thought *Cæſar's* friend. His wife in the mean while, with the native tenderneſs of her ſex, and the common ſuperſtition of the age, lays a ſtreſs on her very dreams to diſſuade him from ſhedding guiltleſs blood.

The diſciples, on this trying incident, we find repreſented to be of juſt ſuch various and unequal characters, as men generally are indeed, but are ſeldom made to be in fictitious compoſitions. *Judas*, whom Chriſt, though he knew him well, permitted to be an apoſtle, (probably to ſhew, that the worſt of men, with the faireſt opportunities, could prove no evil againſt him) after following him to make a profit of keeping the purſe, firſt betrays him for a little more profit; yet, like a true villain, aims to conceal his treachery under marks of moſt affectionate regard: is ſtruck however with remorſe and horror, when he begins to ſee the conſequences of his crime draw nearer; but deſtroys himſelf, inſtead of aſking pardon, becauſe his

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own heart was too bad, to be capable of believing that his Lord could forgive him. *Peter*, on the contrary, whoſe forwardneſs and ſelf-opinion had led him unneceſſarily into the neighbourhood of danger, unable to go through the trial, which he had choſen, ſinks into very wrong behaviour for a while: but having fallen merely through weakneſs, is recovered by a look of the perſon, whom he had ſo meanly diſowned, and gives immediate proofs of the moſt ingenuous repentance. *John*, the beloved diſciple, though driven away with the reſt, (and no wonder) by their common fears, yet cannot ſtay with them; goes back, the ſame hour, to his maſter at the palace of the high prieſt; ſtands by his croſs the next day, receives his dying commands, and takes his mother directly home to his own houſe.

The ſoldiers alſo, and the multitude, are deſcribed with the ſame juſtneſs and propriety. Inſolent and ludicrous beyond meaſure at firſt, and for ſome time; but gradually ſoftened, and compoſed into ſerioufneſs, the more they ſaw: till at length even the heathen centurion, who preſided over the execution, *glorified God, ſaying, certainly this was a righteous man; truly this was the Son of God: and all the people, that came together to that ſight, beholding the things which were done, ſmote their breaſts, and returned* *. But let us proceed with the diſciples.

After his death, we find them all abſolutely hopeleſs about his reſurrection: a circumſtance which undoubtedly adds much weight to their ſubſequent conviction of it; but which no impoſtor would ever have invented, becauſe it appears ſo hard to reconcile with their being foretold both, as they were frequently. A fair ſolution indeed may be given. They thought, what others of the people ſaid, *we have heard out of the law, that Chriſt abideth for ever; and how ſayeſt thou, the Son of Man muſt be lifted up* †? Expecting therefore a victorious and immortal Meſſiah, they choſe, when he ſpoke of himſelf, as one who was to be taken and crucified, rather to put any meaning, or none, upon the prediction of his death, and conſequently of his reſurrection, than to underſtand each in its plain meaning. But ſtill no one would forge a fact wantonly, that muſt be attended with ſuch a difficulty as this. Or, if any one had, he would

* Matth. xxvii. 54 Mark xv. 39. Luke xxiii. 47, 48. † John xii. 34.

would ſcarce have divided the matter ſo very exactly, as to repreſent the diſciples, (which the goſpels do) paying the higheſt honours to his dead body, though his dying extinguiſhed all their proſpects from him; and when they had left off *truſting, that this was he, who ſhould have redeemed Iſrael*, yet aſſerting without the leaſt doubt, that he *was a prophet, mighty in word and deed, before God and all the people* *. Yet in reality, ſuch was the very ſtate of mind, in which perſons, with their notions, muſt naturally be, till he roſe again, ſuppoſing the ſcripture hiſtory of him true: which therefore receives from hence a ſtrong confirmation.

And when he roſe again, the goſpel account of that event alſo carries the like internal marks of genuineneſs. Every thing is told in the moſt artleſs manner: hardly any of the moſt convincing circumſtances dwelt upon, but merely related; and none, that may ſeem unfavourable to Chriſtianity, concealed or palliated. The narration, a very lively picture of the diſorder and confuſion, into which the minds of the apoſtles muſt be thrown by an event ſo ſurpriſing, ſo intereſting; and laid before the world, with juſt ſuch omiſſions and triſling variations, as would happen of courſe in giving it to the other diſciples on the ſpot; and as always do happen, when we inform thoſe around us, with the greateſt ſimplicity, of what we know beſt. Every ſingle part is conſiſtent with every other, when conſidered with due attention and candor. But if any were leſs ſo, a few differences in minute articles, relative to a thing done ſeveral years before, are never allowed to invalidate a perfect agreement in the main fact. On the contrary, the teſtimony of the apoſtles, inſtead of becoming ſuſpicious on this account, would indeed be rather more credible: as they would plainly appear not to ſpeak from previous combination; but each to deliver fairly what he recollected, concerning a matter, of which he was much too ſure in general, to be ſcrupulouſly accurate in particulars. And the Holy Spirit, which guided them, might purpoſely forbear extending his influence to ſome things of ſmall moment, that in after-times men might ſhew whether they would be reaſonable, or whether they would cavil.

But

* Luke xxiv. 19, 21.

But one thing, more eſpecially remarkable, the writers of the New Teſtament have done, which no impoſtors would ever have done; they have recorded the hiſtory of their own weakneſſes, and thoſe of all the apoſtles, juſt as frankly and unaffectedly, as they have done every thing elſe; and in no point more fully, than in the capital one of the reſurrection. They acknowledge themſelves, in general, to have diſregarded ſuch repeated proofs of it, as deſerve the utmoſt regard. And, to come now cloſer to the proper ſubject of my text, one of them acquaints us, that St. *Thomas* particularly, having once fixed it in his mind, that the thing was not likely, and the evidence not ſufficient; inſiſted, that nothing leſs than his own ſeeing and feeling the marks of the wounds ſhould convince him that it was a reality, and not an apparition; the ſame perſon, and not another.

Now this is going a very uncommon, and it may ſeem an incredible, length; but there have been and are perſons, on ſome occaſions full as unreaſonable, though otherwiſe deſerving of much eſteem. And we learn from a paſſage in St. *John*, which there is no colour for thinking was written to account for this before us, that St. *Thomas*'s temper was peculiarly determined and reſolute. Our Saviour, on the death of *Lazarus* in *Judea*, declares his purpoſe of returning thither from *Galilee*. His followers diſſuade him, becauſe he had lately been in great danger there: He perſiſts: *then ſaid Thomas unto his fellow-diſciples, let us alſo go that we may die with him* *. Now the ſame ſteady firmneſs, when fixed on any other point, however different, would be, as we find it here, equally hard to move. And therefore his poſitiveneſs to truſt no one but himſelf, is far from being improbable. Yet it was notwithſtanding very blameworthy. For of whatſoever one man's ſenſes can judge, another's can judge likewiſe: and if credible witneſſes are not credited, all the affairs of human life muſt be at a ſtand.

However, this perverſeneſs being accompanied with no bad meaning; *Thomas* having only carried ſomewhat further, than his companions, the diffidence, of which they had all been guilty; perhaps too thinking his maſter's promiſe, that they ſhould ſee him, a good plea for holding out till he, as well as the reſt had ſeen him; and continuing all the while in the fellowſhip

* John xi. 16.

lowſhip of the other apoſtles, ready to receive the proof which he demanded; our bleſſed Lord with perfect goodneſs offers it him fully. *Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thruſt it into my ſide: and be not faithleſs, but believing* *. This condeſcenſion immediately melted down his obſtinacy, and awakened every right diſpoſition within him: ſo that, far from inſiſting on the rigorous ſcrutiny, which he had before reſolved to make, and was now invited to, he *anſwered, and ſaid unto him*, we may partly imagine with what inward feelings, *my Lord, and my God* †. *Jeſus*, in whom dignity and mildneſs were mixed in the moſt accurate proportion, ſpares his convert the additional confuſion of a reproof: but gives him an inſtruction, ſuitable to the occaſion, neceſſary for himſelf, and uſeful to all the world ever after; that no great virtue could be ſhewn merely by admitting ſcarcely reſiſtible evidence, and conſequently no great recompence could be expected for it: but that preſerving a mind, open to embrace, and careful to ſeek after, ſuch lower degrees and leſs obvious kinds of it, as our heavenly Father may think fit to beſtow, is giving a valuable proof of upright intention, and taking a conſiderable ſtep towards the attainment of diſtinguiſhed happineſs hereafter. *Becauſe thou haſt ſeen me, thou haſt believed: bleſſed are they, that have not ſeen and yet have believed.*

This declaration doth not mean, that any believers merit a bleſſing; which our faith no more deſerves, than our good works do: but only, that faith, productive of good works, qualifies them to receive from God's free gift, that bleſſing, which Chriſt hath merited. Nor doth the former part of it, which comparatively ſlights the faith of St. *Thomas*, imply, that our Saviour's perſonal attendants, who had the teſtimony of ſenſe for his reſurrection and other miracles, were either precluded from any reward, or confined to a ſmall one. For they had overcome very ſtrong prejudices: and, had they manifeſted ever ſo little virtue in the ſpeculative part of their faith; yet they might and did manifeſt a great deal in the practical part; by adhering to it under temptations, by profeſſing it under perſecutions, by promoting it with unwearied zeal: on which accounts a ſuperior degree of glory was juſtly

* xx. 27. † John xx. 28.

promiſed to the apoſtles; notwithſtanding *they believed becauſe they had ſeen.*

But our concern is chiefly with the latter clauſe of the text: and let us conſider well, what our Saviour teaches in it. Not that they are bleſſed, who have had no evidence, and yet have believed. In one ſenſe indeed, of great importance, even theſe are bleſſed. They have thrown themſelves, with humble minds, on God's mercy: they are directed by the wiſeſt precepts: they enjoy the nobleſt hopes: a future ſtate is not leſs real, for their want of ſkill to prove it: and whatever the ground of their faith may be; ſtill the fruit of it, piety and moral goodneſs, are the true qualifications for happineſs, here and hereafter. But though ſuch perſons are doubtleſs rewardable for the conſequences of their belief, they are not ſo for their belief itſelf, conſidered as a mere aſſent of the mind. And therefore our bleſſed Redeemer ſpeaks here of a different caſe from theirs. He came, not to require of men faith without or beyond evidence, but to lay evidence before them: and to aſſure them, that paying reaſonable attention to it ſhould be rewarded, and rejecting it unreaſonably, puniſhed.

Some indeed have argued, that what appears to us falſe, we cannot receive, what appears to us true, we cannot help receiving; and things will appear as they do: ſo that in belief or diſbelief there can be neither praiſe nor blame. But, as by ſhutting our eyes, or turning them another way, we can exclude the ſun itſelf from our ſight, if we pleaſe: ſo, by refuſing to attend, we may evade the force of the plaineſt proofs; and by attending partially, we may ſuffer ourſelves to be overcome by the ſlighteſt objections. Much more then is it poſſible to judge wrong or right in matters leſs clear; according as we do or do not permit vicious inclination, groundleſs prepoſſeſſion, indolence or fancy to influence our choice. And having it as truly in our power to behave well or ill in this reſpect, as in any other; we may be as accountable for our opinions as our actions. It is therefore no leſs real, and ſometimes no leſs important, a part of our duty, to conduct our underſtandings well, than our affections and appetites. And further, as in the government of theſe laſt, we are to be ſtrict in proportion as negligence would be hurtful; and leſs care is requiſite, where little or no harm can follow: ſo in the uſe of our reaſoning faculty, though we ought to avoid all errors, if we can; yet

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we ſhould be much more vigilant againſt errors to the diſadvantage of religion and virtue, than errors in their favour; and our guilt is greater, if we are not: becauſe the former muſt be pernicious, and the latter may be innocent.

But perhaps it will be ſaid, that, whatever God intends for the rule of our faith and practice, he hath certainly made both the truth and the meaning of it ſo clear, that we cannot miſtake about it: and therefore whatever doctrines or precepts are not ſo clear, need not be regarded by us. Now undoubtedly, were we to have choſen our own condition, we ſhould have choſen it to be thus pleaſing and ſecure. Or, were we to have gueſſed about it beforehand, we might have been apt to gueſs it would be ſo. But now, when we know from fact, what it is in other reſpects; to flatter ourſelves, that in reſpect of religion it muſt needs be ſo perfectly agreeable to our inclinations, is palpably abſurd. In every part of our conduct beſides, we are liable to err fatally. How can we imagine then that there is no poſſible hazard in this part? The world, in which we live, was not deſigned for a place of ſafety, but of trial. And as we are tried with many difficulties in doing what is right, why may not we be tried with ſome in diſcovering it? Indeed we actually experience that we are. In multitudes of caſes, great attention is requiſite to find out truth: and yet great inconveniences follow, if we miſs of it. We have certainly cauſe to hope, that the goodneſs of God will relieve us ſome way, ſooner or later, from any extreme ill conſequences of the miſtakes, that we cannot help. But they have no title to relief, who, notwithſtanding all that they ſee to the contrary, will be poſitive, that there can be no danger, and therefore needs be no care; but what they do not fully underſtand, and are not abſolutely ſure of, they may reject without heſitation. Theſe very perſons, in their temporal affairs, are ſtrongly moved by what they apprehend but very imperfectly; believe every day upon mere probabilities, often ſmall ones; take great notice even of poſſibilities; and would think and find it madneſs to act otherwiſe. Why then may not religion, conſidering its awful nature, deſerve a reverend regard from them, though the proofs of it were leſs cogent, or its truths more embarraſſed with difficulties, than they are? The mere ſuſpicion, that a juſt and holy being rules the world, makes our caſe, and ought to make our behaviour, very different from what it

would be elſe. Every degree of evidence for it increaſes the difference. And the obſcureſt intimations, that can be given us, concerning his nature, our own condition, and what he expects from us, deſerve our moſt ſerious practical notice.

Nor muſt it be objected, that if ſuch things were intended to influence human life, every one would experience their influence very powerfully, which many do not. For was not reaſon, was not the principle of ſelf-preſervation intended to influence human life? Yet are there not multitudes, who ſhew, and who have, comparatively, very little of either? But you will ſay, then our Maker doth not deal equally with us. And in one ſenſe it is true: he doth not confer equal advantages on us. But what claim have we to them? If he may create various orders of beings, one much ſuperior to another, as we all know he hath done; he may certainly give one part of the ſame order what ſuperiority he pleaſes over another part. And that we ſhould be ignorant, why he doth ſo, is no more a wonder, than that we are ignorant, why men are not angels, or why brutes are not men. Yet, in another ſenſe, our Maker deals very equally by us all. He will make due allowance, both to the inward frame and outward condition of every individual; requiring only according to what he hath beſtowed; which is perfectly conſiſtent with beſtowing on ſome far more than on others.

But it will be ſaid, that whatever imperfection or whatever inequalities there may be from mens faculties or circumſtances, in their knowledge, either of the particular doctrines and precepts, or the general obligation of natural religion; yet if God vouchſafes to ſuperadd a revelation, one main end of that muſt be, to diſpel the darkneſs, in which reaſon leaves us; and it muſt anſwer its end: and yet in the chriſtian revelation many things remain as dark, as they were before. But indeed the ſolution of the former objection, ſolves the preſent alſo. If God may juſtly give us, at firſt, as low a capacity, or as little opportunity, for knowledge, as he pleaſes: why may he not afterwards make as ſmall an addition to it as he pleaſes; and yet man be bound to receive ſuch addition with thankfulneſs, and regulate his conduct by it? If but the leaſt new diſcovery

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is made to us, if but the leaſt new light is thrown on what we diſcerned imperfectly before, it deſerves proportionable gratitude. And how much then do we owe for the many alarming and endearing truths, part of which are notified ſolely, and part very ſtrongly confirmed, by the goſpel of Chriſt!

But perhaps it will be urged, that ſtill, beſides leaving ſeveral of the doubts of reaſon undetermined, and its difficulties unremoved, ſcripture hath added ſeveral more to them, ariſing from its own myſterious doctrines: and inſtead of clearing up every thing, propoſes to our belief ſome things impoſſible to be cleared up; with which otherwiſe we ſhould never have been peplexed. And we own this to be fact. But then, doth not the teaching of almoſt any new branch of ſcience, in the whole compaſs of nature, produce the ſame effect? Truth is infinite: our capacities finite. And the neceſſary conſequence is, that the farther our knowledge extends, whenever we attempt to look beyond it, (which we need not) the wider we ſhall find the unknown region, that borders upon it on all ſides, and incloſes it round about. So that, if we will inſiſt on comprehending every thing, before we believe any thing, the more is made known to us, the leſs we ſhall obtain of the ſatisfaction we demand.

Once more, however, it may be objected; that ſuppoſing God to favour men with a revelation, he would certainly not fail to provide, that all men might enjoy its full benefit, ſince they are all ſaid to have needed it from the earlieſt ages: whereas chriſtianity appeared late in the world, hath never been notified through the whole of it, nor been accompanied with equal evidence where it hath been preached. But here again: if God is not bound to give all men originally the ſame advantages, with regard to religion or any thing elſe, as he plainly doth not, how is he bound to it in what he ſuperadds? Neither juſtice, nor wiſdom, nor goodneſs, oblige him any more to the one, than the other. Yet he did manifeſt to fallen man immediately as much of the doctrine of redemption as he ſaw to be requiſite: which if men loſt, inſtead of propagating it, the fault was their own. They who were ignorant of Chriſt before his coming, or have been ſo ſince, may poſſibly have received

received much good from it; but aſſuredly cannot be in a worſe condition, becauſe others know him. And there is evidently more kindneſs in making him known to ſome, than to none. All, to whom his goſpel is preached, be it with more evidence or leſs, are, or may be, the better for it if they will. Such as firmly believe and obey it, have the higheſt aſſurance of pardon, grace and everlaſting happineſs. Whoever thinks it but probable, hath both a direction and a comfort, which others have not. Whoever by means of it is but ſtrengthened in the principles of natural religion, nay whoever hath them but more frequently laid before him, may gain conſiderable improvement from it. For even the bare propoſal of truth is often efficacious both againſt ignorance and error.

If ſtill it be imagined ſtrange, that this great remedy for our ſouls hath been a ſecret to ſo many for ſo long a time, is rejected by ſome who ſay they have examined it, and hath little or no good effect on others who profeſs to accept it; conſider only, what is the caſe of the beſt remedies for our bodily diſeaſes? Were they diſcovered with eaſe and immediately? Are all perſons now apprized of them? Is there no room left for doubt concerning them? Do none declare and inveigh againſt them? Do they anſwer, in every caſe, every good purpoſe that nature intended them for? We have but too much experience of the contrary. And yet doth all this hinder them from being valuable gifts of providence; or juſtify thoſe, who deſpiſe or neglect them? If not, why ſhould any one be ſtaggered by ſimilar objections againſt religion? Nay, ſuppoſing they did leſſen the certainty of it, why ſhould he not *take heed* while he travels through the obſcure and doubtful road of life, to every probability of direction from above, *as unto a light that ſhineth in a dark place*, however faintly it be, *until the day-dawn, and the day-ſtar ariſe in his heart**.

This would be our wiſdom, though the evidences, which we have for Chriſtianity, were of the loweſt kind. But what will be the folly and guilt of ſcorning it, if after all they ſhould, as they do approach to the higheſt! We have not indeed the immediate teſtimony of our ſenſes for the reſurrection of Chriſt, for his other miracles, and thoſe of his apoſtles: but we

* 2 Pet. i. 19.

we are as ſure of them, as we could have been if we had lived within a century or two of their days. For the books of the New Teſtament are unqueſtionably of no leſs authority now, than they were 1500 years ago. And even they, who received perſonally the account of theſe mighty works from eye-witneſſes to them, had perhaps but few of them the atteſtation of ſo many concurrent witneſſes, as we have, recorded in holy writ. And they could not have in the ſame degree (what length of time alone can give completely, and hath given us) the knowledge, that thoſe facts, which were at firſt delivered to them for true, were not afterwards diſcovered to be falſe. We are certain, that chriſtianity, far from being detected, eſtabliſhed itſelf on earth, and triumphed over both *Jewiſh* and *Pagan* unbelief by evidence alone: that many of its prophecies are already fulfilled, and room is left, after ſo many ages, for the fulfilling of the reſt: which laſt point alone will be found, on due conſideration, a remarkable circumſtance, and very unlikely to be accidental. Then further: as ſome of the arguments for it are grown ſtronger than they were formerly, to make amends for ſuch as may have grown weaker; ſo we have others which muſt always continue of the ſame force: thoſe, which ariſe from the amiableneſs, the dignity, the perfection of our Saviour's character; from the excellency and efficacy of his precepts; from the internal marks of genuineneſs and veracity in the writings of the evangeliſts and apoſtles.

Yet all this proof, we confeſs, amounts not to the abſolutely full conviction, which they had, who *ſaw with their eyes, who looked upon, and their hands handled the word of life**. It is neither ſo obvious, but we may overlook it; nor ſo powerful, but, if we take pains, we may reſiſt it. Here then we undergo a teſt of our fairneſs and integrity, which, in compariſon at leaſt, the very firſt chriſtians did not. But then, you ſee, our gracious Maſter hath proportioned a bleſſedneſs to it. And beſides, they and their ſucceſſors underwent a much ſeverer teſt, which we do not; that of dreadful worldly ſufferings for the profeſſion of the goſpel. Ours is far gentler, and more eligible: only whether we will believe on evidence abundantly ſufficient, though not the higheſt poſſible: whether we will *walk by faith, not by ſight*†; and preſerve our loyalty to

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* 1 John i. 1. † 2 Cor. v. 7.

our Lord and our God, unſhaken by the falſe opinions and bad cuſtoms of a thoughtleſs world, by the cravings of ſenſual appetites, and the tumults of irregular paſſions and fancies. This is the whole of what heaven requires of us: and if we do it but conſcientiouſly for the ſhort ſpace, that we have to remain here, *the trial of our faith ſhall be found unto praiſe and honour and glory at the appearing of Jeſus Chriſt: whom having not ſeen, we have loved; in whom, though now we ſee him not, yet believing we* may juſtly *rejoice with joy unſpeakable and full of glory*: aſſured of *receiving the end of our faith, even the ſalvation of our ſouls**.

* 1 Pet. i. 7, 8, 9.

SER.

SERMON LXXVIII.

On Christian Faith, and the Public Avowal of it.

Rom. x. 10.

For with the heart man believeth unto righteouſneſs; and with the mouth confeſſion is made unto ſalvation.

A Conſiderable part of profeſſed chriſtians go through the world without forming to themſelves any fixed rules of action at all: but in ſome things follow their own inclination and fancy, how often ſoever it varies; in others, general cuſtom or particular examples, with much indifference, whether they be good or bad: and ſo they patch up a moſt inconſiſtent life; many of them ſcarce ever reflecting enough to ſee their inconſiſtencies; and not a few abſurdly imagining, that human conduct was not intended to be of a piece with itſelf.

Others, who do preſerve uniformity of behaviour, have yet no inward principle from whence it flows, beyond reputation or private convenience. Even they who profeſs a high regard to morals, and in ſome inſtances appear to feel it, have too commonly no feeling at all of the ſtrongeſt moral tie which can be, that which binds us to our Maker; perhaps have never aſked themſelves in earneſt, whether they believe in him: or, if they think they do, have no ſerious impreſſions of gratitude to the author of all good, of duty to the governor of the univerſe: will acknowledge, it may be, when preſſed by argument, that all poſſible reverence is owing to him; yet abſolutely never worſhip him in private, and very ſeldom condeſcend even to ſeem to worſhip him in public. Whatever the haſty

reaſonings of a partial heart ſuggeſt to them, they will eſteem a law of God and nature. But if any thing unwelcome either to their vanity or their ſenſuality be offered to their belief, they will reject it inſtantly, as bigotry and folly, without examination. And if their way of thinking and living be but ſuch, upon the whole, as recommends them to the indulgence of thoſe who need the ſame indulgence; as to any thing further, concerning the regulation of their tempers or behaviour, the means of pardon when they have ſinned, or of help to do better, there is little occaſion, they apprehend, to trouble themſelves.

This view of things cannot but raiſe compaſſionate and melancholy reflections in every pious breaſt. But what completes the unhappineſs is, that while ſuch numbers openly deſpiſe religion, great numbers more, who have no doubt of its truth, nor, when they conſider, of its importance, are yet ſo far from being zealous for it, that they ſeem aſhamed of it: either omitting thoſe public evidences of their chriſtianity, which they know they are commanded to give; or meanly excuſing their obſervance of religious duties as weakneſs or compliance with cuſtom: and ſeldom ſhewing in their common converſation near ſo much concern for that faith, from which they pretend to promiſe themſelves eternal felicity, as they do for their ſlighteſt worldly intereſts, not to ſay their moſt trifling amuſements.

The Spirit of God therefore, who clearly foreſaw, that this, however ſtrange, would be the turn of mankind, that ſome would think it needleſs to believe, and others to profeſs their belief, hath warned men ſeparately againſt each of theſe errors in many places of the New Teſtament, and jointly againſt both in the text; which plainly declares, that faith in the goſpel is the ground of our acceptance with God at preſent; and that an open acknowledgement of the goſpel, in conſequence of that faith, is one of the things neceſſary to our happineſs hereafter. *For with the heart man believeth unto righteouſneſs: and with the mouth confeſſion is made unto ſalvation.*

From theſe words therefore I ſhall endeavour to explain the obligation and importance,

I. Of chriſtian faith.

II. Of a public avowal of it.

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I. The obligation and importance of chriſtian faith.

God, having made us reaſonable creatures, may both as juſtly and as wiſely require from us that we conduct our underſtandings aright, as our affections, appetites, or outward actions; the conduct of all which depends on our underſtandings in a great degree. If then religion be attended with appearance of evidence, enquiring into it muſt be our duty: and if the evidence deſerves belief, unbelief muſt be a ſin; a greater or ſmaller indeed, according as it ariſes from neglects or prejudices more or leſs criminal; but a ſin it muſt be whereever the proofs are within reach. And we may not only well preſume that God would make them ſufficiently obvious, but on trial may perceive that he hath adapting a great variety of them to every degree both of natural capacity and acquired knowledge, in ſuch a manner, that no one needs be deſtitute, where chriſtianity is freely taught, of light enough to convince and direct him.

Doubtleſs we ought to judge of unbelievers with the utmoſt reaſonable charity. But, at the ſame time, both we and they ſhould conſider well our Saviour's declaration, that *if any man will do God's will, he ſhall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God**. For thence it follows, that they who fail of knowing his doctrine, where it is *taught as the truth is in Jeſus*†, fail of it for want of doing his will. Either vicious pleaſure, or worldly intereſts, or indolence, or reſentment miſleads them, which are viſibly the common caſes; or, let them be ever ſo clear of guilt in theſe particulars, they are influenced by the vainty of being ſuperior to vulgar ways of thinking; the pride of not being convinced, but by juſt ſuch evidence as they pleaſe to require; or the preſumptuouſneſs of oppoſing their own imaginations concerning the probabilities of things, (notwithſtanding daily experience of their miſtakes) to the expreſs declarations of an all-knowing God. In vain do men plead their morals in other reſpects, while ſuch immoralities as theſe have dominion over them; or their obedience to the commands of the Almighty, while they reject the great commandment of faith in his word.

But the duty of faith doth not conſiſt merely in giving our aſſent to the truths of religion: a principal part of it is, to recollect them frequently, and ſtrengthen their influence by repeated and voluntary acts of the mind. There are

* John xii. 17. † Eph. iv. 21.

perhaps few in proportion, who had not a ſort of belief, when they thought of the matter laſt. But their faith hath lain aſleep and forgotten, till not only their lives have been filled with ſuch behaviour, but their minds with ſuch notions and maxims, that it is hard to ſay, which prevails moſt in them, the chriſtian or the infidel. Or if they remain ever ſo much perſuaded, that religion is true; they come to look upon it, as a truth, upon which they are not to act, and ſcarce to think of, till they have almoſt done acting. And by that time, ſome have neglected it ſo long, that they go on, with great tranquillity, neglecting it to the end; while ſome again awake from this dream only to fall into another, that being ſorry for having omitted their duty, when it is become too late to do it, is doing it ſufficiently. They, whoſe faith lies in this manner dead in them, have in effect none at all; none of the right ſort, none to any valuable purpoſe. And therefore the great thing incumbent on us is, to revive and exert our perſuaſions of divine truths; oppoſe them to the temptations which aſſault us in this bad world; and believe, not with a languid acquieſcence in certain articles and precepts, when at diſtant times we happen to recollect them; but with a vigorous effort of all our faculties to feel their force on every occaſion. For it is not with the underſtanding alone, but *with the* whole *heart*, that *man believeth unto righteouſneſs*. Nor do we become of the number of the faithful indeed, till we are determined effectually to bear faith and true allegiance to our heavenly King, as well as are convinced of his title to our obedience: till we reſolve to live to him, who, we believe, hath died for us; and bring forth the *fruits of the Spirit**, who hath planted the ſeeds of them in our hearts. By this rule then let us *examine ourſelves*, (for it much concerns us) *whether we be* really *in the faith*†, or only ſeem ſo to be, deceiving our own ſouls.

I now proceed to ſhew the importance of this duty: which is fully expreſſed in ſaying, that *man believeth unto righteouſneſs*: that is, by means of chriſtian faith, he becomes acceptable to God, and gradually improves in all piety and virtue.

Every one of our actions derives its value from the belief or perſuaſion, with which it is performed. Were we to do ever

* Gal. v. 22. † 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

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ſo good a work, without being moved to it by a good principle, we might be more uſeful, but we ſhould ſcarce be better, than if we had not done it at all. But when we act from conviction of an inward obligation; if it be of morals, then we act virtuouſly; if of religion, piouſly. Therefore without faith of one ſort, we can do neither: and in proportion as our faith is perfect, we ſhall do both. A mere ſenſe of the fitneſs of moral virtue is no inconſiderable antidote againſt many ſins. But religious faith hath unſpeakable advantages beyond that which is moral only. For the ſerious perſuaſion of a witneſs, *who ſeeth in ſecret**, of an omnipotent ſovereign, equally benevolent, wiſe, juſt, and holy, muſt inconceivably animate to every thing good, and deter from every thing evil.

Yet ſtill, conſidering our native ignorance, and the original depravity which we find within; conſidering alſo, that by repeated tranſgreſſions we fail not, more or leſs, to inflame our paſſions and appetites, darken our underſtandings, impair our ſtrength, obſcure the proſpect of all that we could hope for, and open a dreadful one of what we may fear: the faith of natural religion alone would leave us in a great meaſure undirected, unaſſiſted, uncomforted; as the experience of all who have been favoured with no other guide, hath always ſhewn. Nay, inſtead of ever giving in fact the help, which from reaſoning we conclude it might, it hath always, in all nations, been overwhelmed with errors, both ſpeculative and practical. But revelation amply beſtows on us every thing we want; a plain and complete law of life, a moſt engaging example of perfect conformity to it, pardon of ſin on moſt equitable terms, aid from above to do our duty, and eternal happineſs for a ſincere, though imperfect, performance of it. How greatly we ſtand in need of theſe things, a little ſerious thought will make any one feel. Or if it did not, we ſurely muſt ſee, that God would not have offered them to man, by a method ſo extraordinary, as the incarnation and death of his Son, and upon the expreſs condition of faith in him as the author of them, if there had not been ſtrong reaſons for it. And therefore whoever ſlights theſe appointed means *of God's righteouſneſs*, muſt expect to ſtand or fall on the foot of *his own*†, without allowance; and will

* Matth. vi. 6. † Rom. x. 3.

will have nothing to plead hereafter againſt bearing the puniſhment of all his ſins, but principally the capital and leading one, of a wilful and careleſs unbelief. May God incline our hearts to conſider what we are, and to accept his mercy! For then, *being juſtified by his grace, we ſhall be made heirs of eternal life**; be *ſanctified by the Holy Ghoſt*†, and gradually *perfected in every good work to do his will*‡: a ſtate, not merely of outward regularity, but of inward purity, which our natural abilities themſelves can never attain.

But in order to this amongſt other duties, we muſt join with our faith, as the text inſtructs us,

II. An open avowal of it. For *with the mouth confeſſion is made unto ſalvation.*

There is no part of the goſpel delivered in a more ſolemn and ſtriking manner, than that, which three out of the four evangeliſts record, and one of them twice: *Whoſoever ſhall confeſs me before men, him will I confeſs alſo before my Father, which is in heaven: but whoſoever ſhall be aſhamed of me and my words in this adulterous and ſinful generation; of him alſo ſhall the Son of man be aſhamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*§. It could not be a ſlight cauſe, which moved him to ſpeak thus: and there was evidently a very great one. He came to eſtabliſh on earth a public profeſſion of true religion, for a teſtimony to all nations. He intended his diſciples for *the light of the world.* He formed his church to be as *a city on a hill*‖, to attract the eyes, and direct the ſteps of bewildered travellers. Concealment therefore was utterly inconſiſtent with his deſign: and all who believed in him, muſt acknowledge him. That perſecution and death would be the conſequence, he forewarned them, was to be no objection. They were neither *to forſake the aſſembling of themſelves together*¶, nor diſſemble the faith, when ſeparate; but to *ſanctify the Lord God in their hearts, and be ready to give an anſwer to every man that aſked them an account of the hope, that was in them***.

This then being their caſe, what ſhall we think is ours? Can it be allowed us, can we wiſh it were allowed us, to avoid bearing teſtimony to him, who *hath redeemed us to God by his*

* Tit. iii. 7. † Rom. xv. 16. ‡ Heb. xiii. 21.
§ Matth. x. 32, 33. Mark viii. 38. Luke ix. 26. xiii. 8, 9.
‖ Matth. v. 14. ¶ Heb. x. 25. ** 1 Pet. iii. 15.

his blood[*], when it will coſt us only a little harmleſs contempt, and perhaps not even that? Or whatever we may wiſh, let us remember, that in his juſt-mentioned awful declaration, it is not being afraid, but *aſhamed of him*, that he condemns: it is not the terror of a perſecuting *generation*, but the ſcorn of a *ſinful and adulterous* one, by which he cautions us not to be moved. If therefore we conceal, on account of that ſcorn, any part of our religious profeſſions, we are guilty in every particular, againſt which his ſentence is pointed: and more guilty ſtill, if we ſlight it, without ſo much as this to excuſe us; from mere indolence or humour; or becauſe, reſolving to be wicked, we will not acknowledge what binds us to be good.

But to ſee the obligation of this duty in a fuller light, let us conſider in a diſtincter view the nature, the reaſonableneſs, the uſefulneſs of it.

We are not required to make an oſtentation of our chriſtianity; or to introduce even the mention of it to the irreligious unſeaſonably, but only when there is hope of doing good. None who is not well prepared in point of argument, ſhould be deſirous of entering into converſation about it with unbelievers. But eſpecially the young and tender minded ſhould be very cautious of engaging in ſo unequal a combat, as that of ingenuous modeſty againſt the profligate boldneſs of the ſcorner and the libertine. Or if at any time they are compelled to it, they ſhould inſiſt on the general proofs of chriſtianity, and not to be drawn into debates on particular difficulties, which probably they are not able to ſolve without help; but wave the preſent diſcuſſion of them, and apply for due information about them. Nay indeed, the fitteſt in all reſpects to *contend for the faith*[†], ſhould watch opportunities, not force them, leſt they exaſperate and harden men, inſtead of reclaiming them. And, be the occaſion of declaring ourſelves ever ſo proper, we ſhould be careful not to do it with intemperate warmth; but always preſerve the ſpirit of our religion, while we aſſert its honour: and expreſs more concern for the impious and profane, than indignation at them; conſidering ſeriouſly the miſeries, in this world and the next, which they bring upon themſelves, as well as on thoſe whom they ſeduce.

After

[*] Rev. v. 9. [†] Jude ver. 3.

After guarding againſt theſe miſtakes, what is the duty which remains? Only this, that without forwardneſs or affectation, without vehemence or bitterneſs, every chriſtian avow himſelf, in every becoming way, to be what he is; by conſtantly attending the public worſhip of God, renewing his baptiſmal vow in the ſolemn ordinance of confirmation, ſtatedly coming to the holy table; and ſhewing, by the reverence of his deportment, that he doth all this as matter of conſcience, not of form; by practiſing with ſimplicity and openneſs every other precept of his religion; and leaving no room to doubt, from what principle he acts: by *abſtaining from all appearance of evil* * in his own behaviour and diſcourſe, and approving it in that of others: by deſpiſing the contempt or hatred, which may fall upon him for ſuch a conduct; *eſteeming* as an honour *the reproach of Chriſt*; and *chuſing rather to ſuffer affliction*, if he muſt, *with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleaſures of ſin for a ſeaſon* †.

Theſe are the things, comprehended in the confeſſion, that ſcripture enjoins. And is any one of them unfit to be done by us, or unworthy to be required of us, or too heavy a burthen to be laid upon us? And if none be, what have we to object? We cannot be neuters between religion and irreligion: neither God nor man will underſtand us to be ſuch. Our Lord himſelf hath made the declaration, that it is no leſs juſt, than peremptory, *he that is not with me, is againſt me* ‡. Which then are we? enemies or friends? Do we pronounce, by declining to appear for it, that the goſpel of Chriſt is of no value; or, by *not being aſhamed of it, that it is the power of God unto ſalvation* §.

But indeed, were it allowable to be of neither part openly, is it adviſable? By declaring ourſelves for the truth, we ſtrengthen ourſelves in it: we take up a character, which it will be our glory and our happineſs that we are bound to maintain. And in all likelihood we ſhall thus get rid of ſolicitations from infidels and libertines; who will never quit us, while they find us wavering or fearful to be touched, upon the ſubject; but will ſurely, either from decency or deſpair, be ſilent, when we have notified in a prudent manner our fixed reſolution. To this

* 1 Theſſ. v. 22. † Heb. xi. 25, 26. ‡ Matth. xii. 30.
§ Rom. i. 16.

this we might alſo, if need were, add a moſt equitable requeſt; that as they ſet up for the great and only friends of liberty, they would tolerate us in an error, (if it can be one) which tends to make every individual virtuous, and every ſociety flouriſhing; which comforts us under all afflictions here, and delights us with the hope of endleſs felicity hereafter: and that they would not think the belief of an ungoverned world, of unrewarded virtue and unpuniſhed villany; of God's having left his creatures without inſtruction in their duty, without certainty of his pardon and grace, without aſſurance of their future exiſtence and reward, ſo extremely meritorious a doctrine; as to entitle the maintainers of it to perſecute the reſt of mankind with ſcorn and ridicule, (the only weapons they have) till all are brought to an unity of profeſſion in this bleſſed creed.

Concealing our faith may indeed ſecure us from being attacked upon it; but not from the dangers of licentious diſcourſe, not from being tempted in various ways by others, not from growing indifferent and betraying ourſelves into ſin. Beſides: whilſt we keep our principles unknown, through a mean-ſpirited fear of bad men, we miſs the eſteem and friendſhip of the good: which may be of unſpeakable uſe to us; perhaps in the moſt important reſpect, enabling us to *hold faſt our integrity* *.

But we are to meaſure the value of owing our regard to religion, not only by the benefit, which we may receive from it, but the ſervice, which we may do by it. One branch of it is, frequenting public worſhip. Now it is very true, that many, who ſtay at home, can uſe the ſame prayers, and read as good ſermons in private, as they hear in the congregation. But, (beſides that probably they will not if they can; and that certainly numbers, whom their practice may influence, cannot if they would;) were every ſingle good chriſtian to ſpend the whole time, which they employ in religious exerciſes here together, juſt in the ſame manner ſeparately; ſtill the mutual animating of each other, the inſtructive example, the awakening call to a thoughtleſs world, theſe things would be loſt; the chriſtian church, *the pillar and ground of the truth* †, would fall to ruin by quick degrees; the chriſtian ſyſtem of religion and virtue would die and be forgotten with

* Job ii. 3. † 1 Tim. iii. 15.

the preſent believers in it, or even before them; excepting ſo much of it, as might perhaps be imperfectly preſerved by methods leſs effectual.

It is not therefore without cauſe, that ſo great a ſtreſs is laid on attending God's holy ordinances: which whoever frequents reverently, teaches others to frequent them in the ſame manner; but whoever ſhews a contempt of them, encourages others to do ſo too. And the like is the caſe through the whole extent of piety and morals. Where our influence is the weakeſt, yet every one who appears in earneſt on the ſide of God and Chriſt and virtue, muſt add ſome ſtrength to the cauſe, and ſome ſpirit to the ſupporters of it. It is a common warfare, in which we are engaged. If any one be allowed to deſert his ſtation, every one muſt have the ſame allowances: and then, humanly ſpeaking, what hinders, but all muſt be given up? The patrons of infidelity and libertiniſm, who, as one ſhould think, have many reaſons to be reſerved, they declare themſelves without the leaſt ſcruple. Only conſider therefore, if we are to be ſhame-faced and ſilent, while they are bold and boaſtful; how monſtrous is the impropriety, and how unhappy will be the event!

But beſides the general conſequences of *holding faſt the profeſſion of our faith without wavering* *, or ſhrinking from it; let us reflect alſo, what particular effects it may have on our friends, our dependants, our ſervants, our families; on thoſe who are united to us in the neareſt relations, and whoſe happineſs conſtitutes a great part of our own. All who barely know us and think well of us, will of courſe be in ſome degree, either the ſteadier in the faith and practice of chriſtianity for our public adherence to it, or more unſettled for our ſeeming to ſlight it: and this one difference in our behaviour may very poſſibly have weight enough with more than one amongſt them, to determine his conduct, and ſtate for ever. But ſuch as are intimate with us, will be more powerfully ſwayed by what they ſee in us. And they who live under our roof, who naturally learn almoſt every thing from us, who pride themſelves perhaps in being like us, there is no hope that they will be religious, if they have any ground to imagine, that we are not cordially ſo. But taking due care to ſhew them that we are, will do much towards promoting their future happineſs at the ſame

* Heb. x. 23.

ſame time with their own; and indeed the preſent welfare too of both. For as religion furniſhes the ſtrongeſt motives to every part of virtue and prudence; ſo, unleſs our example inſtruct thoſe around us to perform their duty towards God, they will probably ſoon come to neglect it towards us, as well as towards others and themſelves: whereas giving proof that we honour him, is the way to be honoured in thought, word and deed, by them; by all the good, and even by moſt of the bad. Or how unequally ſoever eſteem may be diſtributed now, all will be abundantly rectified in that deciſive hour, when they, *that ſleep in the duſt of the earth, ſhall awake; ſome to everlaſting life, and ſome to ſhame and everlaſting contempt*: when *they, that be wiſe, ſhall ſhine as the brightneſs of the firmament; and they, that turn many to righteouſneſs, as the ſtars, for ever and ever* *.

* Dan. xii. 2, 3.

SERMON LXXIX.

PRYING INTO THE SECRET THINGS OF GOD REPROVED.

LUKE xiii. 23, 24.

Then ſaid one unto him, Lord, are there few that be ſaved? And he ſaid unto them, ſtrive to enter in at the ſtrait gate: for many, I ſay unto you, will ſeek to enter in, and ſhall not be able.

THERE is ſcarce any thing which proves both wiſdom and rightneſs of mind more fully, than proper behaviour on ſudden occaſions, and proper anſwers to unforeſeen queſtions: for what a man ſhews himſelf to be at ſuch times, we have in general great cauſe to believe he really is. Now to this trial, our Saviour living a public life, in the midſt of perſons taking all advantages to inſnare him, was perpetually expoſed; and his character never ſuffered by it. His temper continued always compoſed and beneficent: his replies, when circumſtances allowed it, were open and plain: at other times mixed with prudent reſerve; but always tending to convert the moſt unfit enquiries into opportunities of communicating ſeaſonable inſtruction. One inſtance of this, amongſt many, the text affords: where we find, that as *he went through the cities and villages teaching*, ſome forward inquiſitive man was earneſt to be told, if there ſhould be *few* or many *ſaved*. To this enquirer perſonally he anſwered nothing: but reproving his ſuperfluous inquiſitiveneſs by a ſilence, that expreſſed at once dignity and mildneſs, addreſſed himſelf to all, that were preſent; acquainting them what was the whole, that they needed to know and remember, in relation to that ſubject: in diſcourſing on which, I ſhall conſider

I. The queſtion propoſed.

II, The anſwer given to it.

I. The

I. The queſtion is put in very general, and ſeemingly inoffenſive, terms: yet probably a great deal of *Jewiſh* pride and uncharitableneſs couched under it. For conſidering the known ſpirit of that people in thoſe days, it is obvious to ſuſpect, that this buſy man's inquiry proceeded from an ill-natured hope of being confirmed in the national perſuaſion, that God was *not the God of the Gentiles* *; but had reſerved future happineſs for the *Iſraelites* alone. And this is the more likely, both as their own writers diſtinguiſh them by the deſcription of a *few*, in oppoſition to the multitude of mankind †; and as our Saviour, in the ſequel of his anſwer, declares that many *Gentiles*, from all parts of the earth, ſhould be admitted into the kingdom of heaven; and many *Jews* excluded ‡.

But ſuppoſing there was no ground for imputation either of ill will or vanity; ſtill all ſuch queſtions, for this is a leading one to many others, are uſeleſs and irreverent. To be ſatisfied indeed, that the Lord and King of all is juſt and good and wiſe, we are eſſentially concerned; for, without it, we could neither honour and love him, nor enjoy any ſolid comfort within ourſelves. And this general truth, our ideas of what infinite perfection muſt comprehend, and our experience of a right and kind and prudent conſtitution of things, unite to prove to us in a very convincing manner. Since then God is juſt, he will make none miſerable, farther than they deſerve: ſince he is good, he will both pardon and reward, in ſuch degree as is fit: and ſince he is wiſe, what appears diſorder and confuſion to our ſhort ſight, will appear in the end perfect regularity and proportion. Had we been apprized only of thus much, we could have had no right, however deſirable it might have been, to know any thing farther beforehand, even concerning ourſelves; for it is enough, that we ſhall be treated with equity and mercy: much leſs could we have pleaded any ſhadow of right to be told, what proportion of our fellow-creatures ſhall behave well, and be accepted; or ill, and be puniſhed; or why there are not more of the former, and fewer of the latter ſort; or any thing of this nature. To do our duty, and truſt God with the government of his own world, would be our whole concern.

Suppoſing

* Rom. iii. 29. and ix. 21, 22. † See 2 Eſdr. viii. 1, 3. Comp. v. 15, 16.
‡ Luke xiii. 28, 29.

Suppoſing him then to place us in a ſtation of much clearer light; which, thanks be to his infinite bounty, he hath done; by adding thoſe important notifications, which we read in ſcripture, of what we are to believe and do, to hope and fear: it cannot be, that his voluntary communication of what he might have withheld, ſhould authoriſe us to demand ſtill more. Undoubtedly new queſtions, in abundance, may be aſked on this new face of things: but who is intitled to aſk them? And yet this is not inſiſted on, becauſe they cannot be anſwered; for moſt, if not all of them, may very eaſily. Why are ſo many nations without the knowledge or belief of this important revelation? Partly, becauſe chriſtians have neglected to acquaint them with it, or mixed it with corruptions, or diſgraced it with wickedneſs of life: partly, becauſe themſelves, or their anceſtors, did not attend to it, when propoſed, with ſuch fairneſs of mind, as they ought. But what then ſhall become of thoſe nations? Such among them as perſonally rejected the goſpel, ſhall be puniſhed in proportion to the wilfulneſs, or careleſſneſs, that was the cauſe of their ſo doing: ſuch as never knew it, ſhall be at leaſt in no worſe a condition for it, perhaps in a better. But as to chriſtians themſelves: why have ſo many of them perverted their religion ſo grievouſly? And why do ſo many of a purer profeſſion lead moſt impure and ſinful lives? partly, becauſe ſome lay ſtumbling-blocks, of various kinds, in the way of their brethren: but chiefly, becauſe others turn away their eyes from the light which they might have; or walk not ſuitably to that, which they actually have. And as, in all theſe things, there are numberleſs alleviations or aggravations of guilt; every man ſhall be treated accordingly: ſome *beaten with many ſtripes*, ſome *with few* *. But in particular, what either ſhall ſuffer, we neither are told, nor have reaſon to complain that we are left ignorant; ſince it will be our own fault, if we ſuffer any thing at all. *Therefore*, as the ſecond book of *Eſdras* juſtly exhorts, *be not thou curious, how the ungodly ſhall be puniſhed: but inquire, how the righteous ſhall be ſaved* †.

But queſtions end not here. Suppoſing it mens fault, that they obey not the laws of God: why were thoſe laws made ſo ſtrict? Becauſe a holy being could not enact any other, nor we be

* Luke xii. 47, 48. † 2 Eſdr. ix. 13.

be raiſed by any other to the ſpiritual happineſs, which he deſigns for us hereafter. The only way therefore was that, which he hath taken: firſt to ſet before us a perfect rule of life; then to make every allowance, that is truly equitable, for our falling ſhort of it. But why was our nature formed ſo liable to fall ſhort of it, in the ſad degree that we often do? Why, if it had not, an obedience, proportionably exacter, muſt have been required of us; with leſs hope of pardon, and heavier puniſhment for diſobedience; as in the caſe of thoſe *angels, which kept not their firſt eſtate* *. And whatever advantage it might have been, upon the whole, to inherit all the good diſpoſitions, with which our firſt parents were framed; unallayed with the bad ones, which they have tranſmitted to us; we are no more intitled to thoſe advantages, than to the poſſeſſions, which our anceſtors have forfeited, or the ſtrong conſtitutions which they have deſtroyed, for their poſterity, as well as themſelves. In ſome degree every created nature muſt be imperfect. And on many accounts, that variety of degrees, which we ſee in the works of God, is fit and uſeful. We know the reaſons, in part at leaſt, for which, beings, much lower than us, exiſt; why may there not then be very ſufficient reaſons for our being no higher, than we are? And where ſhall man, or angel, reſt contented; if either may claim, as long as God can give? Poor as our condition is here, ſtill it was worthy of the Almighty to place us in it; elſe it had not been done: for we muſt allow him, who could make ſuch a world as this, to be a better judge than us, whether it was fit for him to make it, or not. And were it to continue, to its final period, the ſtrange mixture of good and bad, which it is; yet conſidering the glorious recompence, that going through it well prepares us for, we ſhall be far from having cauſe to think hardly, or meanly, of providence. But we have aſſurance given us that the days ſhall come, when *the kingdoms of this world ſhall become the kingdoms of the Lord and his Chriſt* †, in a fuller ſenſe, than they have ever been yet. And perhaps, the times already paſt may bear only a ſmall proportion to that joyful future ſeaſon, when religion ſhall be rightly underſtood and univerſally practiſed, mankind be happy, and God glorified. Bleſſed are they, that

* Jude, ver. 6. † Rev. xi. 15.

that ſhall live in this ſtate of things: more bleſſed they, that ſhall contribute to it.

But, though we ought to attend, carefully and thankfully, to whatever information God gives us, yet all eagerneſs of knowing more than is revealed, betrays the ſame wrong turn with that of the inquirer in the text; who, inſtead of the great queſtion, which it concerns every man to aſk, and which Chriſt came on purpoſe to anſwer, "what he himſelf ſhould do to be ſaved," choſe to aſk one, which he had no concern in, and therefore could expect no anſwer to, "How many ſhould be ſaved." Accordingly our bleſſed Lord neither ſatisfied him, nor hath on any other occaſion declared, what proportion of the human race ſhall be happy, and what miſerable. In one or two places he ſeems to repreſent the former as the leaſt number*: in the parable of the ten virgins he makes them equal †: in that of the ſervants, there is but one unfaithful‡; in that of the gueſts invited to ſupper, but one that *had not on a wedding garment*§. And yet to this *laſt* parable he hath added the reflection, that *many are called and few choſen*. In his own days indeed this was moſt literally true: and has been too much ſo ever ſince. But ſtill St. *John* foreſaw a time, in which one part only of true chriſtians ſhould be *a great multitude, that no man could number, of all kindreds and people and tongues*‖: and the more ancient prophets foretel, that all nations *ſhall know the Lord*¶, *and all be righteous***. Plainly then it could not be our Saviour's deſign, upon the whole, to determine the proportion between good and bad; but with a view of their danger, to animate all in the zealous purſuit of that recompence, which, (be the numbers of each what they would) too few obtained, whilſt any failed of it, that ſo, as many as poſſible might be induced to take the right courſe; and God be juſtified, how many ſoever took the wrong. Therefore, as the book of *Eſdras*, already quoted, exhorts, *aſk thou no more queſtions concerning the multitude of them that periſh. For when they had taken liberty, they deſpiſed the Moſt High, thought ſcorn of his law, and forſook his ways.——It was not his will, that men ſhould come to nought: but they which he created, have defiled the name of him that made them, and were unthankful*

* Matth. xx. 16. † Matth. xxv. 1, 2. ‡ Matth. xxv. 15 &c.
§ Matth. xxii. 11. ‖ Rev. vii. 9. ¶ Jer. xxxi. 34. ** Iſ. lx. 2.

*unthankful unto him, which prepared life for them**. Juſtly therefore doth our Saviour in the

II. Part of the text, to which I now proceed, refuſe to gratify the queriſt's curioſity, and return an anſwer intirely practical: that it was not the buſineſs of mankind to pry into what God had hid, but mind what he had revealed, and to maſter another kind of difficulty, that of fulfilling his commands: that multitudes indeed, who profeſſed religion, would finally appear to have profeſſed it in vain; but this was a matter, not to raiſe idle ſpeculations upon: God would be ſure to take care of his behaviour to his creatures; let them take care of their duty to him: whatever number ſhould be ſaved, great or ſmall, they knew the way, and there was but one, to become part of it; *ſtrive to enter in at the ſtrait gate: for many I ſay unto you, ſhall ſeek to enter in, and ſhall not be able.* Not that any chriſtian ſhall ever do his beſt to enter into life, and fail of it: but that many imagine God hath marked out other ways to happineſs than obeying his laws; and many too, who are fully ſenſible there is no other way, uſe ſo little diligence in following this, that their progreſs is inſufficient to arrive at eternal felicity.

One fatal miſtake of believers in religion hath always been, an abſurd notion, that their ſteady faith in it, their zeal to ſupport and ſpread that faith, their punctilious obſervance of certain forms, their conſtant practice of ſome precepts, and their periodical pretences of ſorrow for having wilfully lived in the neglect of the reſt; that one or other of theſe things would be accepted, inſtead of true piety and virtue. No thoroughly good heart indeed can fall into this error: but wrong inclination, joined with ignorance, or what is worſe, falſe inſtruction, may give it deep root: and our Saviour, as he found it widely ſpread, took unwearied pains to pluck it up. Immediately after the text he declares, that neither acknowledgment of his authority, nor attendance on his teaching, nor any thing elſe, ſhall avail the *workers of iniquity*†. And in his ſermon on the mount, after ſtating the duties of mankind in their utmoſt purity and ſtrictneſs, he proceeds directly to urge his hearers, in words very little different from thoſe now before us, to a careful performance of them all, however difficult, as the only

* 2 Eſdr. viii. 55—60. † Ver. 25. 26. 27.

method of attaining future bliſs. *Enter ye in at the ſtrait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to deſtruction; and many there be which go in thereat; but ſtrait is the gate, and narrow the way, which leadeth unto life; and few there be that find it**. All, who preach other doctrines he pronounces, in the next words, *falſe prophets*: all who depend on other hopes, even though they had perſonally followed him, and wrought miracles in his name, he utterly diſowns, and aſſures them, they have laid their foundation on the ſand. Indeed, through the whole of his miniſtry, he had but one rule, in relation to this matter: *If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments*†. When the twelve, whom he had choſen, came, with great ſatisfaction, to give him an account of the mighty works they had wrought, and the devils they had caſt out, he partakes in their joy; but inſtantly adds; *notwithſtanding, in this rejoice not, that the ſpirits are ſubject unto you; but rather rejoice, becauſe your names are written in heaven*‡: becauſe by a truly religious frame of mind, you are qualified for that place, whither *ſhall in no wiſe enter any thing that defileth, neither whatſoever worketh abomination; but they, which are written in the lamb's book of life*‖. So perfect was his regard to truth and virtue; that no deſire of gaining diſciples, no tenderneſs to the diſciples he had, could ever incline him to give any one perſon the leaſt exemption from the leaſt duty. And if ſuch was their caſe, never muſt we indulge imaginations, that ours will be more favourable. Chriſtianity is not an artful contrivance for conveying bad men, who will make uſe of it, to heaven, fraudulently; but it is *the doctrine according to godlineſs* §: and its advantage is, not that a chriſtian needs not be ſo good a man as another, but that he hath the means of being a better: which whoever fails to be, profeſſes it only to his condemnation. *Know ye not*, ſaith the apoſtle, *that they which run in a race, run all; but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain*¶. *And if a man ſtrive for maſteries; yet he is not crowned, except he ſtrive lawfully***. Now there is one law, peculiarly neceſſary to be obſerved, if ever we would obtain a crown in the chriſtian combat; which yet many are ſtrangely prone to overlook, who would ſeem ſincerely deſirous to obſerve all the reſt: I mean, an humble dependence

* Matth. vii. 13, 14. † Matth. xix. 17. ‡ Luke x. 17.—20.
‖ Rev. xxi. 27. § 1 Tim. vi. 3. ¶ 1 Cor. ix. 24. ** 2 Tim. ii. 5.

dependence on God's mercy, procured by the death of our bleſſed Lord; and on God's aſſiſtance, promiſed in return to our earneſt prayers. Pardon is not a debt, but a favour; which the giver may beſtow on his own terms. Our ſufficiency for doing our duty, is not from ourſelves, but from above; nor can we have it, unleſs we aſk it: and were we to obey much more perfectly, than we do; it would ſtill be no more, than what we are bound to; and even were that otherwiſe, eternal rewards cannot be due for temporary ſervices. Preſumption in our own ſtrength is deſtructive to our virtue; confidence of our own merit is injurious to our Maker: but a deep ſenſe of human unworthineſs and of divine grace, will inſpire us with that lowlineſs of heart which God will accept, and that vigilance of conduct which he will bleſs: *This* therefore *is the victory, that overcometh the world, even our faith**. But beſides all thoſe who through blameable miſtakes thus fall into a wrong way: multitudes want courage to ſet out, or perſeverance to continue, in what they know is the right way. For every ſinful habit is to be thrown off at the entrance; every virtuous path, however rugged, purſued; every vicious one, however frequented and delightful, ſhunned, throughout the progreſs; thus *ſtrait is the gate*, and thus *narrow the way that leadeth unto life*. Numbers ſee their duty, wiſh to perform it, and faintly *ſeek to enter in*; but not *ſtriving* as they ought, fail in the attempt. Perhaps they even do many things well; and would do all, but for one favourite indulgence, or another, which they cannot reſolve to quit: ſo there they ſtop ſhort, and are ruined for ever. Some difficulties our very nature produces; wrong education many more; and when thoſe of voluntary cuſtom are added, then the oppoſition grows formidable indeed. But ſtill our Saviour purpoſely gives full warning of it; here in general terms: but, through a good part of the next chapter, he ſpecifies particulars; ſhews, how many things would render men unworthy of *eating bread in the kingdom of God*†: and as great multitudes were following him, turns and aſſures them, they muſt quit every thing that was deareſt, and bear every thing that was hardeſt to them, when conſcience required it, if they meant to be his diſciples: bidding them therefore *ſit down and count the coſt*; conſider well, how they ſhould be able to perform what he expected,

* 1 John v. 4. † Luke xiv. 15.

before they undertook it*. Not that he intended to repreſent the *one thing needful*†, as a matter of indifference; that might be done or omitted, as men ſhould have a higher or lower opinion of their own ſtrength: but, inſtead of drawing after him, by falſe expectations, a crowd of unthinking admirers, that would firſt diſhonour, and then perhaps forſake him; he choſe to tell them the worſt plainly, and at once; that, as they could not but ſee the importance of obeying God's will, they might ſee and weigh its difficulties too; and ſo, with deliberate and well-inſtructed reſolution, enter upon the work; which however laborious, is indiſpenſable.

They who have not been thus forewarned, go on indeed with great eaſe; but it is not in religion, that they go on. Doubtleſs common decency, and outward regularity, are very valuable things: would God, more attention were paid to them! But ſtill with theſe there may be little true ſenſe of duty, to God, or even man; little care, that the heart and affections be ſuch as they ought; nay much indulgence of very criminal actions, either concealed from the world, or approved by it. In ſhort, almoſt every thing may be right, in the opinion of thoſe around us, perhaps in our own: and almoſt every thing wrong in the eyes of our Maker. How great is the need then, that ſuch as are proceeding ſecurely in the broad way, ſhould be told the difference of that which leads unto life! But to others alſo, ſtrong repreſentations, of the purity of the divine precepts, and of the obſtacles that turn men aſide from the obſervance of them, are highly uſeful: they excite us to ſearch into every branch of our conduct, every ſecret receſs of our ſouls: they prevent the negligence, that betrays us into danger; and the ſurprize, that diſconcerts and diſpirits us at the appearance of it: they keep up our vigilance, put us on exerting all our own ſtrength, and aſking more from God: by which means, temptations, that elſe might have proved fatal, are intirely avoided, or eaſily overcome.

Timorous and dejected minds indeed may be hurt, by inſiſting too much on the trials, which they have to go through. to theſe therefore a different, but yet a conſiſtent, view of things muſt be preſented: and accordingly our Saviour, with the utmoſt tenderneſs, invites *all, that are weary and heavy laden*, to come

* Ver. 25—33. † Luke x. 42.

come unto him, and they ſhall find reſt unto their ſouls: his yoke ſhall prove *eaſy to them, and his burthen light**: in perfect conformity to what had been propheſied of him, that *he ſhould feed his flock like a ſhepherd: gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his boſom*†. Religion hath both its ſeverities and its encouragements: and the whole of both muſt be laid before mankind; but the one, or the other dwelt on, as the caſe requires; that ſo, ſome may be alarmed into right conduct, others quieted in it; and neither *the heart of the righteous made ſad, whom God hath not made ſad*; nor *the hands of the wicked ſtrengthened, by promiſing him life*‡. But undoubtedly the principal need is, of mens being awakened to a ſenſe, that God requires much more, than is uſually practiſed, or even thought of. For ſuperfluous fears, though we ought carefully to guard againſt them, are, of the two, not near ſo pernicious as deceitful hopes. It is indeed a very awful conſideration that the difficulties of becoming what we ſhould be are ſo great and ſurmounted by ſo few. But ſtill the truth ought not to be diſguiſed: and the difficulty of doing what may and muſt be done, is no argument for any thing but unwearied diligence: and for that, it is the ſtrongeſt argument in the world. That moſt men act wickedly, is no more an objection againſt religion; than that moſt men act unwiſely, is againſt common prudence. That ſo many fail by taking a wrong courſe, is only a warning to make ſure of taking the right. And if in that, ſeveral duties are painful, it is not chriſtianity, that hath made them ſo. All its peculiar precepts are eaſy in themſelves, and aſſiſtances to the practice of the reſt. The hard ſayings are declared indeed in the goſpel; but enjoined by reaſon itſelf, when duly cultivated, and by the very nature of things. Theſe, therefore, are unchangeably what they are, and all we have to do is to ſubmit to them. But if our religion had made the duties of life ſtricter, it hath made the hopes of aſſiſtance and reward ſo much ſtronger, that we ſhould have no manner of cauſe to complain; much leſs to faint. The temptations to diſobey, which ariſe from our make and circumſtances, God himſelf hath expoſed us to; and therefore if we apply to him, will aſſuredly ſupport us under, to a degree that he will accept. The ill habits which proceed from wrong education only, cannot have got very ſtrong hold; if

* Matth. xi. 28, 29, 30. † Iſ. xl. 11. ‡ Ezek. xiii. 22.

if we begin but to extirpate them, as ſoon as we come to the government of ourſelves. And as for thoſe which, by our voluntary miſconduct afterwards, have taken deeper root; ſince the miſchief is of our own doing, we are bound to more pains and more patience in undoing it again. When a long irregularity hath impaired health, a long ſtrictneſs of regimen will be needful to recover it: but every diſeaſe of the ſoul is curable at length, though many of the body are not. Indeed the ſevere trials are almoſt wholly at firſt; and therefore our Saviour hath peculiarly remarked, that *ſtrait is the gate*: but when once we have contracted our appetites and paſſions enough, to get through that; the remaining obſtacles diminiſh, uſually by quick degrees: and after a while, the ways of wiſdom become *pleaſantneſs; and all her paths peace**. Then the difficulties themſelves turn into delight, and the happy traveller goes on his way rejoicing; till, the days of his pilgrimage being completed, *entrance is miniſtered unto him abundantly into the everlaſting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jeſus Chriſt*†.

I conclude with the words of a heathen writer; but highly deſerving every chriſtian's attention. "Think of the life of "man, as of a long road, leading towards a holy temple where "we are to be initiated in divine myſteries: a road full of "paſſengers, ſome loitering and trifling, ſome running about, "and hindering one another; ſome wandering, and loſing "themſelves. For many are the devious and deceitful paths, "leading to pits and precipices: but one alone, narrow and "ſteep and rough and trodden by few, that points directly for-"wards; which brave and induſtrious ſouls, with great re-"ſolution, force their way through: earneſtly longing for the "initiation, and captivated with the beauty of the place they "aſpire to: where when they arrive, all their labour ends, "and every deſire is fully ſatisfied. Begin the journey then: "enter and be initiated; take poſſeſſion of the good things "provided there: for wiſhes themſelves can extend no far-"ther‡."

* Prov. iii. 17. † 2 Pet. i. 11. ‡ Max. Tyr. Diſſ. 23. Ed. Dav. 4to, 39.

SER.

SERMON LXXX.

The Mortification of Irregular Desires and Appetites, an Evidence of a true Christian.

Gal. v. 24.

And they, that are Chriſt's, have crucified the fleſh, with the affections and luſts.

THIS expreſſion, *crucifying the fleſh*, may probably ſeem to moſt, when they firſt hear it, or attend to it, a very ſtrange one: as, no doubt, numbers of others in ſcripture do. But a little conſideration will ſhew, that there is no cauſe to cenſure them, or be offended at them. For amidſt the multiplicity of languages, that are in the world, and the various nations, tempers and circumſtances, of the people who are bred up to uſe them; it is unavoidable, but there will be in each many ways of ſpeaking, which though eaſy and familiar by cuſtom to one part of mankind, muſt yet, to the reſt, appear harſh and unaccountable. This is the caſe even of neighbouring countries in our own times: much more then muſt it be expected in thoſe tongues, of which the vulgar uſe hath long ſince failed, and which formerly expreſſed the ſentiments of diſtant nations, inſpired both by the age and the climate they lived in, with a different turn of thought and ſtile. Hence proceed the ſurprizing warmth and boldneſs of figure, the abrupt tranſitions, the ſudden lofty flights of the eaſtern writers and ſpeakers, utterly contrary to the cool and regular genius of the *European* languages. And amongſt the former, the compoſitions of the *Jews* muſt of courſe have a peculiar tincture and propriety of their own: not only becauſe they were prohibited, for good reaſons, all needleſs commerce with other lands; but chiefly becauſe divine revelation delivered to them ſuch doctrines and precepts, and conſequently ſuch terms, as the heathen had not: which

which muſt likewiſe greatly increaſe in number by frequent references to their own articles of faith, obſervances and ſacred books. When chriſtianity was publiſhed to the world, here was again a new ſet of diſcoveries and ideas, added to the preceding: which being firſt communicated in Hebrew, were thence transfuſed into *Greek*, by the apoſtles addreſſing themſelves to the Gentiles. Thus was the ſtile of the New-Teſtament produced: which being as literally tranſlated, and cloſely imitated, as it well could, (for the nature of the thing required ſtrictneſs) the ſame forms of ſpeech have been derived down into the modern tongues of chriſtian countries. And ſo it hath come to paſs by a kind of neceſſity, that, in diſcourſes on religion, words, meanings, conſtructions, images, occur, extremely remote from the common idiom of the language on other occaſions. And theſe, weak perſons are apt to miſtake, artful diſputants to pervert, and unlearned or unfair affecters of wit and free thought to ridicule; though originally they were of plain ſignification, and are ſtill, when underſtood, full of good ſenſe and beauty.

Thus, *crucifying*, or as the apoſtle elſewhere puts it, *mortifying* * the fleſh, is a phraſe far out of the road of our daily converſation, and of our reading on ſubjects of buſineſs and entertainment: from whence it eaſily happens, that the ſuperſtitious miſapprehend, and the prophane deſpiſe it; though indeed it denotes a reaſonable, a neceſſary duty, and deſcribes that duty, not only in a ſtrong, but elegant manner. To ſhew theſe things clearly, I ſhall

I. Explain to you the riſe and general intention of this way of ſpeaking.

II. Specify more diſtinctly the nature of the duty deſigned to be taught by it.

III. Shew you how ſtrictly our belonging to Chriſt obliges us to practiſe that doctrine.

I. I ſhall explain to you the riſe and general intention of this way of ſpeaking in ſcripture.

Now the words, *fleſh* and *ſpirit*, though employed by the writers of the New-Teſtament in different ſenſes, according to the ſubject of which they treat, are yet commonly expreſſions of the moral ſtate and character of men; the diſpoſitions of his heart

* Col. iii. 5.

heart towards piety or sin. *Spirit* is the principle of reason and religion: *flesh* of appetite and passion. Every one feels in himself both right and wrong inclinations. The former our conscience approves. And therefore pursuing them would on that account alone be properly called, *walking* after *the spirit* *, that *inward man, which* naturally *delighteth in the law of God* †. But a much stronger ground for it is, that the divine Spirit hath not only revealed to us the whole rule of life, and the most powerful motives to observe it, but is continually present to our minds, exciting and strengthening us, if we permit him, to every good work. On the other hand, *all flesh having corrupted his way before God* ‡, sinners may be justly said to *walk* after *the flesh*, because they live conformably to the wicked customs of the world. But the true foundation of the phrase is, that this *corruptible body* § subjects the fallen children of *Adam* perpetually by its irregular propensities, to a variety of temptations, hard to be overcome. And therefore even heathen authors have represented it, as the principal source of moral evil: no wonder then, that those of scripture do, on fuller knowledge of the case.

But in St. *Paul* more especially the *flesh* means our vicious tendencies; not only those to sensual indulgence, but the whole system of them. Thus ver. 13. of this chapter: *brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not your liberty for an occasion to the flesh*: that is, to any blameable purpose. But the particular blameable use, which he had in view, was that of uncharitable contention. For it follows immediately, *but if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.* Again, ver. 19. having said, that *the works of the flesh are manifest*, he proceeds to reckon amongst them, not only *adultery and lasciviousness*, but *variance, envy, strife, sedition.* And the *fruits of the spirit*, opposed to these, ver. 22. *are* not only *temperance*, but *long-suffering, peace, goodness, faith*, or *fidelity, meekness.*

Farther: because there is a connexion and sympathy between the various dispositions of the same kind, whether moral or immoral, each adding vigour and strength to the other: the several vices, to which mankind is prone, are described in God's

* Rom. viii. 4. Rom. vii. 22. ‡ Gen. vi. 11, 12.
§ Wisd. ix. 15.

word, as uniting into and forming a living body, hence denominated *the body of ſin*, or of *the luſts of the fleſh* * ; of which every criminal inclination is a member, thus, when the apoſtle had enjoined chriſtians to *mortify their members, which are upon the earth* †, he inſtantly explains himſelf to mean the parts of this figurative body of ſin, which he goes on to enumerate: *covetouſneſs, anger, fornication, uncleanneſs, malice, blaſphemy.*

And, in conſequence of this, becauſe not only the nature of all men is tainted originally, but the conduct of moſt men hath, in ſome reſpects at leaſt, been habitually unjuſtifiable; therefore the ſins, which they have indulged, conſidered in the manner above mentioned, as united into one organized body, are alſo ſtiled in ſcripture, *the old man*; in oppoſition to that *new man*, or bleſſed change of temper and behaviour, which the goſpel was deſigned to produce. And however ſingular the former of theſe phraſes may appear; the latter, which in itſelf is equally ſo, that of becoming a new man, is both frequent in our common ſpeech, and warranted by the politeſt of claſſical authors.

This expreſſion therefore having taken place, the amendment of our hearts and actions is ſometimes denoted by laying aſide or *putting off this old man.* Thus *Eph.* iv. 22. *that ye put off, concerning the former converſation, the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful luſts; and put on the new man, which is created according to God*, that is, according to the image of God, *in righteouſneſs and true holineſs.* And becauſe our gracious Redeemer was a perfect example of theſe, putting on the new man is elſewhere called, *putting on the Lord Jeſus Chriſt* ‡: a mode of ſpeech fully vindicated by the ancient uſage of the *Greek* tongue, in which the New Teſtament was written. For in that, *putting on any perſon* ſignified, forming ones ſelf by his character, and imitating his manner.

At other times, this intire change of affections, will and demeanour, is expreſſed more ſtrongly. We are ſaid to *be dead to ſin, and raiſed up again to walk in newneſs of life* §: which means, to be ſeparated for ever from bad habits and cuſtoms, and enter into a different ſtate and courſe, of thinking and acting;

* Col. ii. 11. † Col. iii. 5. ‡ Rom. xiii. 14. Gal. iii. 27.
§ Rom. vi. 2, 4.

acting; in which *the former things are passed away, and all things are made new* *. The promises indeed, of this renovation on our part, and of grace to accomplish it, and future happiness to reward it, on God's part, are first made in baptism: which therefore the scripture † calls our new birth to this new life. But then, it is only by continual care, (if providence allows us time) to grow in grace, and become every day more completely dead to all transgression, and alive to all duty, that we shall arrive at the maturity, requisite for our acceptance.

Farther yet: when the word of God intends to give us the most awakening sense, how intire our change must be, and with how unremitted a resolution we must arm ourselves against every bad inclination; then the expression chosen is, not that of dying to sin, but of *mortifying*, killing it. For the original signification of the word, translated, *mortify*, is not the now common one, of keeping under and treating with some austerity, but of destroying, putting to death: as where the apostle saith, *if through the spirit ye do mortify the deeds of the body*, unlawful indulgences, *ye shall live* ‡; and in the passage already cited, *mortify therefore your members, which are upon the earth.* In pursuance of which mortal enmity between religion and wickedness, every serious believer considers himself as a *soldier of Christ* §, whose whole life is to be a warfare against those *lusts which war against the soul* ‖.

And lastly, because the great end of our Saviour's incarnation and death was to engage us in this good fight, and enable us to obtain the victory; therefore overcoming and sacrificing to him our unlawful desires, is, by an elegant allusion to the manner of his death, (which was painful and slow, like our extirpation of them) called *crucifying* them; not only here in the text, but in another parallel one; *knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin* ¶. Whence also our apostle saith farther, that *by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*, by the example of his sufferings, and the grace which they have procured, *the world is crucified unto him, and he un-*

* Rev. xxi. 4, 5. † John iii. 3—7. ‡ Rom. viii. 13.
§ 2 Tim. ii. 3, 4. ‖ 1 Pet. ii. 11. ¶ Rom. vi. 6.

to the world *. He regards it no more, than the *Jews* did our Saviour, when they condemned him to the moſt ignominious torments, but hates it mortally, and deſpiſes it utterly, ſo far as it is ſinful: and is content, that, in return, it ſhould hate and deſpiſe him, rather than comply with its wicked cuſtoms.

This then is the true chriſtian mortification. And the figures, deſcribing it, are indeed remarkably bold and full of energy: but they are accurate, inſtructive, animating; and alas, but too neceſſary, to convince unthinking and unwilling creatures, as we are, (prone to explain away into nothing every precept we can) of the zeal and ſeverity, with which we are to extirpate all that is faulty within our ſouls. The commands of our bleſſed Lord himſelf carry in them the ſame force: *if our right hand offends us, to cut it off; if our right eye, to pluck it out* †: if any deſire we feel, will be a probable occaſion of our falling, to ſuppreſs it, however dear: if any action we are engaged in, to quit it, however advantageous in other reſpects. And the reaſon he adds, admits of no reply. *It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands or two eyes, to be caſt into hell-fire*: it is better to undergo the moſt painful ſelf-denial here, and be recompenſed with heavenly felicity hereafter; than to enjoy the *pleaſures of ſin for a ſeaſon* ‡, and ſuffer the vengeance of the Almighty for ever.

Having now explained the riſe and general intention of the principal phraſes of this ſort in ſcripture, I proceed

II. To ſpecify more diſtinctly the nature of the duty deſigned to be taught by them.

And here you cannot fail to perceive at firſt ſight, that harſh treatment of our bodily frame, only for the ſake of treating it harſhly, is no part of chriſtian mortification, or chriſtian duty. It is indeed a practice contrary to reaſon, and no leſs to ſcripture. For St. *Paul* ſaith, *no man*, that is, no wiſe man, *ever hated his own fleſh* §. Yet the opinion, that ſuch things are in themſelves acceptable to God, hath not only been common in falſe religions, but crept into the true: and both furniſhed unbelievers with an objection againſt it, and miſled believers very unhappily. For they, who fancy, that exerciſing rigour on their

* Gal. vi. 14. † Matth. v. 29, 30. xviii. 8, 9. Mark ix. 43, 45, 47.
‡ Heb. xi. 25. § Eph. v. 29.

their perſons, hath any good in it, ſeparate from the good uſes to which it may contribute, are ſome of them led to fancy alſo, that the farther they carry it the better; till they hurt, perhaps ruin, their healths, diſorder their underſtandings, or however ſour their tempers: while others conceive, that there is very great merit, in a very little ſuffering; and conſequently perſuade themſelves, that God will readily excuſe the ſmaller faults of a behaviour not quite ſo moral as it ſhould be, on their punctual performance of their higher duties, as they eſteem them; though, in truth, not only imaginary, but often of little more than imaginary hardſhip. And thus, whereas common ſinners are open to remorſe of conſcience, which there is hope may, ſooner or later, through the grace of God, amend them: theſe, on the contrary, proceed ſelf-applauded, and fully perſuaded of their title to a diſtinguiſhed ſhare of divine favour. On which account our Saviour tells the Phariſees, men of auſterity in ſome reſpects, and wondrous exactneſs in little matters, that *the publicans and the harlots ſhall go into the kingdom of heaven before them**.

Not that chriſtians, of more abſtemious lives than ordinary, are therefore to be condemned as Phariſees and hypocrites; or derided, as weak and ſuperſtitious. Every one is bound to employ ſuch means for his preſervation from ſin, and advancement in piety and virtue, as either God's word hath preſcribed, or his own reaſon and experience recommend. Now ſome may find rules to be uſeful or neceſſary, which to others would be neither. Some again may raſhly cenſure what they would do much better to imitate. And all perſons, eſpecially all who live in eaſe and plenty, ſhould be attentive to *keep their bodies in ſubjection*†: not haraſſing them as enemies, but ruling and providing for them as ſervants, in ſuch manner as to make them both willing to obey, and able to perform their work. They ſhould watch over their natural fondneſs for pleaſure, and tendency to follow the cuſtoms of the world; not with unreaſonable ſcrupulouſneſs, but with religious prudence: learn to ſuſpect their favourite inclinations, and the opinions that countenance them: check themſelves in proportion as they grow eager, ſtop and look round them with care: never adventure

* Matth. xxi. 3. † 1 Cor. ix. 27.

venture to the extremity of what is lawful, but in all dubious caſes lean to the undoubtedly ſafer ſide: be moderate in the moſt allowable gratifications of this world, and delight principally in cultivating and improving thoſe pious and virtuous affections, which alone can *make them meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the ſaints in light** ; of a happineſs intirely ſpiritual, and abſtracted from fleſh and blood.

But then, while we obſerve this caution in regard to worldly objects, we muſt be careful alſo, on the other hand, that we carry it not to dangerous or extravagant lengths; that we ſeem not unthankful to, or ſuſpicious of him, *who hath given us richly all things to enjoy*† ; that we diſguiſe not religion by putting it in a melancholy and forbidding dreſs; that we be not betrayed by the reſtraints, under which we lay ourſelves, either into vain ſelf-opinion and ſpiritual pride, or a rigidneſs of temper, very unſuitable to the gentle ſpirit of the Chriſtian profeſſion: but particularly, that we forbear to condemn, or even diſpiſe, our brethern of more ſeeming latitude; who, it may be under the appearance of a freer life, (which was our Saviour's own caſe, for he *came eating and drinking* ‡) preſerve really and inwardly a ſtricter guard over their thoughts, words, and actions, than we do. And in general, all perſons ought to take heed, that while they are watching againſt the approach of one ſort of ſins, thoſe of another do not find a ready admiſſion. We are willing enough to keep at ever ſo great a diſtance from the faults, to which we have little or no inclination; and often affect to make our zeal in that reſpect remarkable: but then perhaps more favourite vices have eaſy entrance into our breaſts, and take firm poſſeſſion of them. We are ſhocked, for inſtance, and with much cauſe, at the monſtrous and ruinous eagerneſs for pleaſure, the profligate and unprecedented contempt of religion, that prevails in the world: our behaviour, on theſe heads, is unblameable, exemplary; and we value ourſelves upon it beyond bounds. Yet poſſibly, all the while, we indulge ourſelves to the full another way: are unjuſt and fraudulent, or ſelfiſh and unreaſonable, or penurious and hard-hearted, or cenſorious and unforgiving, or peeviſh and ill-tempered; make every one about us uneaſy, and

* Col. i. 12. † 1 Tim. vi. 17. ‡ Matth. xi. 19. Luke vii. 34.

and those chiefly, whose happiness ought to be our first care. This is applauding ourselves for being fortified where the enemy is not likely to make an attack: and leaving the places, that are most exposed, quite undefended. Every one therefore ought to study the weak parts of his own heart and conduct, and spend the main of his attention upon these: that so not only a wrong inclination or two may be rooted up, which if left to themselves would scarce grow) or may be sacrificed in favour of others as bad; but the whole *body of sin* be destroyed; the *flesh*, the principle of evil, *with* all *its affections and lusts*, nailed to the cross of Christ.

And this duty of mortification is no more confined to one season, than to one sin. The practice of it either must be constant, or will be fruitless. The time of Lent indeed hath been more especially appropriated to it: not that we should think the shew, or the reality, of a little more exactness than ordinary, for a few weeks, (productive perhaps only of ill humour) so meritorious; that when we have once got it over, we may live almost as we please, till the unwelcome days return, when we are to atone afresh for our past offences, and so make way for the commission of future ones. For, as the son of *Sirach* observes, *He that washeth himself after the touching of a dead body, if he touch it again, what availeth his washing? So is it with a man, that fasteth for his sins, and goeth again and doth the same. Who will hear his prayer, or what doth his humbling profit him*[*]? Our great concern is to mortify all irregular desires with such incessant care, that there may be as little need, as little room, as possible, to distinguish one season from another in that respect. But because we are strangely apt to postpone a work, generally disagreeable in proportion as it is necessary; our church hath wisely directed, that the negligent, (and we all are such in some measure) should now be more solemnly called to consider their ways, afflict their souls for their transgressions, and renew the intermitted discipline which is requisite to make their hearts better. This is our true business at present. Methods of keeping Lent, which end with it, and leave behind them no durable effect, cannot be of much use;

[*] Eccles xxxiv. 25, 26.

uſe; and may be fatal, by deceiving us into a falſe ſecurity, and forgetfulneſs of what I propoſed to ſhew you,

III. That our chriſtian profeſſion ſtrongly binds us to mortify continually every immoral appetite and paſſion. *They, that are Chriſt's, have crucified the fleſh, with the affections and luſts.*

Inſtead of this, the apoſtle might have ſaid, (like the philoſophers of his own and preceding times) they who are truly rational beings, who ſee the beauty of virtue and deformity of vice, who feel the pleaſures and the pains of the moral ſenſe, who form juſt notions of the real good and evil of man, who are ambitious of imitating their Creator and acquiring his favour in their preſent ſtate of exiſtence and perhaps a future one: but in ſaying, *they who are Chriſt's*, he hath ſaid all this, and much more. Chriſtianity comprehends every conſideration of nature and reaſon in the fulleſt manner; and as they are all inſufficient, ſome too ſpeculative and unaffecting, ſome too diſputable and uncertain; adds others of ineſtimable value, peculiar to itſelf. A heathen may want almoſt intirely, and muſt want in a great degree, both the means of learning what mankind is moſt deeply intereſted in, and motives and power to practiſe what he had learned: a chriſtian, allowed to read and hear the word of God, cannot, without inexcuſable negligence: and *of them to whom much is given, much will be required*[*]. Through Chriſt, who hath enlightened us, we *know all things*[†]; *through Chriſt which ſtrengtheneth us, we can do all things*[‡]: through Chriſt, who died for us, what we do ſhall be rewarded though deſerving nothing, with eternal life. And thus hath *the grace of God, which bringeth ſalvation*, not only *taught*, but enabled us, *denying ungodlineſs and worldly luſts, to live ſoberly, righteouſly and godly in this preſent world*[§]. They, who are Chriſt's in *name* only, bind themſelves to this: they, who are in reality his, perform it. *If any man have not the ſpirit of Chriſt, he is none of his*[‖]: and *the fruit of the ſpirit*, we are told immediately before the text, and through the whole Scripture, are the pious movements of a good heart, and the actions of a good life. Our bleſſed Lord *gave himſelf for us, that he might ſanctify and cleanſe us, and preſent us to himſelf holy*

[*] Luke xii. 48. [†] 1 John ii. 20. [‡] Phil. iv. 13.
[§] Tit. ii. 11, 12. [‖] Rom. viii. 9.

*holy and without blemish**. If then we labour not to become such, we frustrate, so far as our own concerns reaches, his gracious intentions, and make his sufferings vain. If we crucify not our affections and lusts, *we crucify him afresh, and put him to open shame*†; pour contempt on his glorious undertaking ourselves, and expose it to the scorn of others: the consequence of which will be, that as *while we profess to know him, in works we deny him*‡, so will he in the day of judgement *profess to us, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*§. Still it should be observed, that so far both good and bad christians are his as to be always under his dominion. *None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself*, exempted from his authority: *whether we live or die, we are the Lord's*‖; but the wicked continue under his government, just as upon earth, rebels continue subjects; not intitled to benefits from their prince, but liable justly to sorer punishments than his other enemies. Think then, will you be *Christ's at his coming*¶, only to have *vengeance taken of you in flaming fire***, or to *enter with him into his glory*††? If the latter be your choice, the only way to it is, that you think it not too much to crucify your flesh figuratively, renounce and destroy your forbidden desires, however painful it be, for him; since he thought it not too much to let his flesh literally be crucified for you. And if you will make sure of doing this at all, you must do it immediately.

Perhaps you will say, we hope it is done already: for the text assures us, all believers have done it. But observe: at that time almost all professed believers were real ones; for they had no temptation to make a false profession: and in general, speculative believers were practical ones; else they would never have suffered what they did. But in our times, the case is much altered. And in all times, the true method of arguing is, not, *we are Christ's*, and therefore we *have crucified our affections and lusts*; but, *we have crucified our affections and lusts*, and therefore *we are Christ's*. Our faith must be proved from our works: not our works from our faith. By *their fruits ye shall know them*, is the rule‡‡: and by those we must know our own state, as well as that of others.

* Eph. v. 25, 26, 27. † Heb. vi. 6. ‡ Tit. i. 16. § Matth. vii. 23. ‖ Rom. xiv. 7, 8. ¶ 1 Cor. xv. 23. ** 2 Thess. i. 8. †† Luke xxiv. 26. ‡‡ Matth. vii. 20.

But ſuppoſing we have cauſe to believe it good, have we not greater cauſe to believe it good, have we not greater cauſe to be ſenſible it is not perfect? And ſhould we not be ſtriving continually to make it more ſo? *They that are Chriſt's*, the apoſtle tells us, *have crucified the fleſh.* But he doth not tell us, they have done it ſo effectually and ſo completely, as they ought. On the contrary he tells us, that he himſelf had *not* yet *attained*, but was ſtill *preſſing on towards the mark**. And ſurely we ſhould be doing it without ceaſing. Unleſs we are careful to advance, we ſhall be driven back; unleſs we purſue our enemy to deſtruction; though put to flight, he will return: though *wounded* as it were *to death, his deadly wound will be healed*†: and gradually, if not ſuddenly, his empire may become more abſolute, and our condition more deplorable, than ever. At leaſt he will be perpetually annoying us, diſturbing our peace, taking away our comfort, darkening our proſpects. Nor ſhall we be loſers in this life only, by neglect of going on to perfection: but in the next alſo, the leſs complete the victory is, the ſmaller will be the reward: and they *who have ſown ſparingly, ſhall reap alſo ſparingly*‡. Let us therefore ſow plentifully the ſeeds of every virtue; and extirpate with ſuch diligence every *root of bitterneſs*, that there may be the freeſt room and the fulleſt nouriſhment for every grace of the chriſtian life to flouriſh, and be fruitful. *Of ourſelves* indeed *we can do nothing* §. But this is far from being a juſt plea for ſtopping where we are: ſince *God is able to make all grace abound towards us; that we having always all ſufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work*‖. Provided then we apply to him, by the means he hath appointed, and engaged to bleſs, humble faith, earneſt prayer, ſtrict vigilance, and conſtant uſe of his holy ordinances, we ſhall not fail to experience the truth of his promiſe: *They, that wait upon the Lord, ſhall renew their ſtrength: they ſhall mount up with wings, as eagles; they ſhall run and not be weary; they ſhall walk, and not faint*¶.

* Phil. iii. 12, 13, 14. † Rev. xiii. 3. ‡ 2 Cor. ix. 6.
§ John xv. 5. ‖ 2 Cor. ix. 8. ¶ Iſa. xl. 31.

SER.

SERMON LXXXI.

On confirmed Faith in the Power and Justice of God.

Heb. xi. 17.

By faith, Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Iſaac: and he, that had received the promiſes, offered up his only begotten Son.

THE character of *Abraham* in general is repreſented throughout the word of God, as highly reſpectable. But his obedience to the divine command, in devoting to death, and ſacrificing, ſo far as the act of the mind was concerned, his beloved ſon, the only heir of his family, and of all the gracious predictions made to him, is peculiarly celebrated for its tranſcendent piety; firſt in the Old Teſtament, by an angel from heaven, ſpeaking in the name of God; then in the New, by the apoſtle St. *James*, as well as the writer of this epiſtle. But as they, who look at the ſun too intently, dazzle their eyes, till all around them, and even the light itſelf, appears dark: ſo men have ſtrained their thoughts, in comparing and meaſuring the weakneſs of their own faith and reſolution againſt the ſtrength of *Abraham*'s, till they have been quite confounded with it. And hence ſome have imagined this direction to be ſuch a one as could not poſſibly come from God: whilſt others have thought it was a trial, rather of his diſcernment, than of his dutifulneſs; and that though he meant well, he might have reaſoned better. The former opinion is deſigned to contradict and diſcredit ſcripture: nor is the latter, though intended to remove an objection againſt it, by any means conſiſtent with it. For we ſhould never have found there ſuch lofty encomiums of his proceeding ſo far, through miſtake, towards an action,

which would have been extremely unnatural and barbarous, if the injunction to do it had not altered the quality of it: but whatever kind acknowledgement had been made of his good purpoſe, there would certainly have been a reproof of his wrong judgment; at leaſt an admonition, that it was wrong: whereas we find nothing but unmixed commendation of his behaviour. For the ſake, therefore, both of ſuch as incline to either of theſe notions, and of many humbler and devouter minds; who yet feel, (as perhaps we have now and then moſt of us done) great reluctance in their affections againſt this article of ſacred hiſtory, and ſome difficulties in point of reaſon alſo; I ſhall endeavour to ſhew diſtinctly,

I. The poſſibility of God's giving ſuch an order.

II. The evidence which *Abraham* had, and we may have now, of his actually giving it.

III. The improbability, that the obedience paid to it ſhould have any bad effect in after times.

IV. The good ends, that might be and were promoted by it.

I. The poſſibility of God's giving ſuch an order.

Indeed, were we but nearly ſo modeſt as we ought to be, we ſhould be very backward to queſtion, whether a being of unſearchable wiſdom can do what there is any competent proof he hath done: and ſhould carry a ſtrong ſenſe of our own ſhort-ſightedneſs and incapacity along with us, to check all petulance of arguing on ſuch points. But happily a moderate ſubmiſſion of our poor underſtandings to the divine, will be ſufficient on the occaſion before us.

That *the God of the ſpirits of all fleſh**, *in whoſe hand is the ſoul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind*†, may *take away* at his pleaſure what he hath *given* only during his pleaſure ‡, cannot poſſibly be doubted. We experience, that in the daily courſe of his providence he takes away the moſt innocent, the moſt deſerving, the moſt uſeful perſons, very unexpectedly, and, to our thinking, very unſeaſonably; for cauſes not to be known till *the day of the revelation of his righteous judgment* §. And, ſhocking as this may often ſeem, or afflicting as it may feel, it is yet no more than removing his ſubjects,) in whom he hath abſolute property, and over whom he hath unlimited authority) from one part of his dominions to another,

* Numb. xvi. 22. † Job. xii. 10. ‡ Ibid. i. 21. § Rom. ii. 5.

another, ſtill to remain under the ſame gracious government, and only to ſerve in a different and better ſtation.

Now what he ſo continually doth by various diſeaſes, and what we call accidents, (many of them attended with long and dreadful ſufferings) why might he not, if on any occaſion he ſaw it proper, do by a ſhorter and eaſier method, by the hands of another human creature? Magiſtrates appoint their officers to execute thoſe, whom they have condemned. Kings and generals appoint their armies to deſtroy multitudes, that are guiltleſs themſelves, though poſſibly involved in the guilt of others. Killing would be murder in both theſe caſes, if a lawful command did not alter the nature of them. But that ſuperſedes and overrules the obligations to the contrary, which elſe would ariſe from the common relation of man to man. Surely then God might always give the ſame command whenever he thought fit to interpoſe. And the perſon, who had his authority, was well authorized, and bound to act according to his commiſſion. Elſe not only *Abraham* would have acted unjuſtifiably in this matter, but the *Jews* in making war on the *Canaanites*, *Jehu* in extirpating the houſe of *Ahab*, many other perſons in many other things, all which, the ſcripture ſaith, were done in obedience to the voice of heaven. And the conſequences of making theſe conceſſions, (for we cannot ſtop at one) every ſerious believer will ſee with horror. But in truth we need make none of them. If God cannot empower a perſon to do any thing, but what would be lawful without his order, ſome of the loweſt of us have a right to do more than he. And if he can empower in one ſuch caſe, why not in all: in that of life and death, as well as the reſt?

Since then his mere command given might oblige one man to take away the life of another: it might oblige a father to take away the life of his ſon. For the particular relation of kindred, can no more be pleaded as a ground of diſobeying the divine will, than the univerſal relation of humanity. We own, God hath enjoined parents to love their children: but not better, than they love their Maker. He hath planted in their hearts inſtincts of warm affection towards them: but not to the prejudice of their duty towards himſelf. The law of nature, that of the land, may require a man to put his guilty ſon to death; to expoſe his innocent ſon, for the needful ſervice of the public, to unavoidable deſtruction; nay, himſelf to fight againſt

againſt his ſon, if they are members of two ſocieties at war with each other. And why might not God require whatever of the like ſort he judged to be requiſite? The magiſtrate's only juſtification is, that he acts on the authority of God, as declared by the voice of nature: and why is it not a ſufficient juſtification, that *Abraham* acted upon the ſame authority, as declared by the voice of revelation? One end of ſacrifices probably was, to recognize, that all things are God's gift, by ſurrendering ſome choice parts of them to him in this form. Now *Iſaac* had been the gift of God in a moſt peculiar ſenſe: his parents had enjoyed the comfort of him for many years. And if he, who might have ſnatched him away before, whenever he would, by any of the common methods, was pleaſed to demand him back at laſt by as extraordinary a one, as that in which he beſtowed him, what could be ſaid againſt it?

I acknowledge, it may ſeem hard-heartedneſs to argue in ſo rigid a manner on ſo tender a ſubject: and am very ſenſible, that there is no poſſibility of conſidering *Abraham*'s caſe as our own, nay of imagining it diſtinctly as his, without bleeding inwardly at the thought: and rejoicing from ones ſoul, that the days of ſuch commands are long ago paſt. But ſtill the right of iſſuing them forth was ever inherent in God, and muſt be confeſſed, and when it is needful, vindicated. To this very hour both religion and virtue call upon us frequently to controll and act againſt our moſt affectionate inward feelings, even towards them that are deareſt to us; though not near to the ſame degree, that *Abraham* did. And it is a very ungrateful return, inſtead of thanking God, that he doth not carry our trial ſo far, to inſiſt that he cannot.

He cannot indeed require what is abſolutely and always unfit: but taking away life is fit or unfit, according to circumſtances. He cannot require a parent to hate his child: and it is the height of infidel perverſeneſs, to interpret our Saviour's words, of *hating father and mother and wife and children* *, literally and ſtrictly, when we have a plain direction to interpret them comparatively †. But he may require a parent, as we have daily proof, willingly to yield up and reſign his child. and to offer him, is but one ſtep further, however painful a one. He cannot give men a general commiſſion to take away each

* Luke xiv. 26. † Matth. x. 37.

each others lives: for this would be inconſiſtent with the ſcheme of his providence, and deſtructive to mankind. But he may give a particular commiſſion of that ſort in ſome extraordinary juncture: for it may be to their advantage. He cannot order a ſingle life to be taken away, or a ſingle action of any kind to be done, without reaſon; for it would be contrary to the perfection of his nature. But he may have many reaſons utterly beyond our reach. And to aſſert that he can have none, is to ſet up our own underſtandings for infinite, and deny his to be ſuch. Whether we can perceive any reaſons, and what, in the preſent caſe, will be enquired under the fourth head. It ſuffices for this firſt, that God might ſee reaſons to give forth the command, which the ſcripture ſaith he did. He ſaw indeed at the ſame time reaſons againſt the execution of it: as *Solomon* did againſt the execution of his, though a very wiſe one, for the diviſion of the child *. But *Abraham* could by no means penetrate ſo far: and therefore was bound to obey, if on due conſideration he was ſure he was ordered. Let us now then examine

II. What evidence he might have of this, and we may have even now.

The Almighty and all-wiſe cannot be without ſome way, probably many ways, of notifying his will, whatever it be, clearly to his creatures: for even we can notify ours clearly, one to another. If an equal of ours were to bid us do what *Abraham* was bidden: though we ought to refuſe obedience, yet we ſhould not doubt, or we need not long doubt, who it was, or what he ſaid. And why could not *Abraham* be equally certain, when God ſpoke to him? That we know not, how God ſhewed it to be himſelf, is no argument in the leaſt, that he did not ſhew it effectually. If it were, it would be an argument againſt all revelation, as well as this. Some indeed have objected, that *Abraham* could not have ſo full proof by any revelation, that God enjoined him to ſacrifice his ſon, as he had by reaſon, that it was criminal. But, you have ſeen, he had no proof of its being criminal, if God enjoined it: but full proof of the contrary. And therefore the objection, rightly ſtated, is only, that he had not ſo much evidence of the injunction, as he had, that the action, unleſs it were

* 1 Kings iii. 25.

were enjoined, was unlawful. Now even this is more, than can ever be made out. But, ſuppoſing it: A judge hath ſeldom or never ſuch abſolute certainty of the guilt of a priſoner tried before him, as he hath, that unleſs he be guilty, he ſhould not condemn him. Yet ſtill, if the evidence of his guilt be ſufficient, he condemns him very juſtly. And ſo, if the evidence of God's command was ſufficient, *Abraham* very juſtly might have ſacrificed *Iſaac*. Let us therefore conſider, without prejudice, whether it was or not: fairly taking the caſe, as it lies in ſcripture.

There we find, that he had enjoyed the privilege of ſupernatural communications from God, for above the ſpace of fifty years: during which time we have many of them recorded, and there might be many more. He had infallible aſſurance, that they were true ones; not only from viſible appearances of angels, and of the divine glory, but from the punctual accompliſhment of the predictions contained in them: particularly, the deſtruction of *Sodom*, and the birth of *Iſaac*, in his and *Sarah*'s old age; events, which God alone could foreſee, or bring to paſs. And it was *after theſe things*, as *Moſes* takes care to give notice expreſsly *, that he was tried with the command to offer up his ſon. Now ſurely by ſo long experience he was thoroughly qualified to diſtinguiſh real revelations from imaginary ones. Nor would God either permit the man, whom he honoured with the title of *his friend* †, to be miſled into a horrible and moſt afflicting crime, by a deluſion of Satan, attended with all the external marks of truth; or deliver a command to him of ſo extraordinary a nature, and leave him doubtful of its genuineneſs; but would certainly remove all poſſible difficulty about believing it, when thoſe of obeying it were ſingly ſo hard to ſurmount. Indeed an order, ſo ſtrangely different from any that he had ever received, and which deprived him of the deareſt bleſſing he had, muſt of itſelf put him on his guard, to the very utmoſt, againſt miſtaking: however prepared he might be by the former myſterious diſpenſations of providence, for future ones. That he loved *Iſaac* moſt tenderly, no one can diſpute: that he had a general tenderneſs of heart, his interceding for the vileſt of ſinners clearly proves: that his notions of God's moral attributes were juſt and lively, appears

* Gen. xxii. 1. † 2 Chron. xx. 7. Iſa. xli. 1. 8.

appears from his own words in his very interceſſion; *that the righteous ſhould be as the wicked, that be far from thee: ſhall not the judge of all the earth do right*?* And that he had any enthuſiaſtic turn of mind, or any ſuperſtitious principles, that could induce him to think the offering up his ſon preſcribed when it was not, or the voluntary perpetration of ſo ſhocking a deed an act of merit, that could procure him a compenſation from heaven for deſtroying his whole comfort and hopes at once; there is no ſhadow either of proof or likelihood. We never find him elſewhere attempting to ſacrifice human victims. There had nothing remarkable of any ſort befallen him, that could even ſeem to require one; much leſs ſo exceedingly precious a one: and the *heathens* themſelves did not offer up their ſons, without being, as they thought, in the moſt urgent neceſſity and extreme danger. Indeed we are not certain, that there was in his time ſuch a practice in the world: or, if there was, that he knew it. Or if he did; as we find it anciently denied†, and no where affirmed, that this execrable cuſtom prevailed in his native country, probably his education muſt lead him to abhor it: and certainly the whole ſpirit of his religion was totally different from the bloody, as well as the lewd, idolatries and ſuperſtitions of *Canaan*.

Some indeed have ſuſpected the contrary, becauſe it is not ſaid, that he expreſſed any ſurprize, or even reluctance, on receiving the command. But neither is it ſaid, that he expreſſed any joy, when a countermand ſtopped his hand. Yet muſt he not of neceſſity, muſt not any man in like circumſtances, be his religious opinions what they will, have felt both? and therefore why may not ſuch things well be underſtood, without being related? and eſpecially as to the former, what if the ſacred hiſtorian drew a veil over agitations, too ſtrong to be deſcribed: as the painter of a heathen ſtory is ſaid to have done, and is praiſed for doing it, on the ſame occaſion? Might not *Abraham*, notwithſtanding this, feel the utmoſt agony of paternal fondneſs; beg of God to preſerve him from illuſion and error: beg that, *if it were poſſible, this cup might paſs from him*‡: yet ſtill, when the will of God, ſo far as he was capable of judging, appeared to be otherwiſe, acquieſce without expoſtulation? For *Sodom*, it is true, he did expoſtulate. But how

* Gen. xviii. 25. † *Philo* de *Abrahamo*, p. 27. ‡ Matth. xxvi. 39.

different were the two caſes? That was a charitable plea for others: this had been an intereſted one for himſelf. If *Sodom* was deſtroyed, all hope of repentance was cut off from a multitude of ſinners: if *Iſaac* ſuffered, it was not as a puniſhment; but as a trial, ſure to end well. And therefore the former caſe called for interceſſion: the latter, for obedience only.

Having no room then to apprehend, that *Abraham* had any thing in his mind to miſlead him; we can have none to doubt, but he examined ſuch an order as this with the greateſt circumſpection, and yielded only to irreſiſtible evidence of its being divine. Beſides, it was not given him to be executed that moment, without leiſure to recollect himſelf. Three days intervened before the time for the execution of it: and during all theſe his ſon was continually in his ſight, going along with him to the place of ſacrifice: nothing interrupted his attention to the horrors of this one dreadful ſubject. Full time was allowed for imagination to cool, for nature to work, for objections of every ſort to be raiſed. Yet *Abraham* perſevered: and therefore his conviction muſt be founded on proofs, that could not be ſhaken.

It might indeed appear ſtrange to him, that God ſhould mention no motive to an injunction ſo ſevere. But he would perceive immediately, that one motive was the trial of his faith, which was tried more completely by aſſigning no other: and he would perceive afterwards, that no other could be aſſigned, becauſe the intention of heaven was that the deed ſhould not be done.

Beſides this leſſer difficulty, there were, in point of reaſon, two principal ones. The firſt was, the unlawfulneſs of the action: and how that might be removed, I have ſhewn you. The other, to which the verſe after the text refers, was, the prediction, that *in Iſaac his ſeed ſhould be called*: that the holy nation, and the promiſed Meſſiah, ſhould deſcend from him. For, it might be alledged, how could that be verified, if he was to be ſlain now? And yet, with whatever laws of human ſociety God might diſpenſe, he would certainly preſerve his own truth inviolate. But in what manner *Abraham* anſwered this, the following verſe informs us. *He accounted* he reaſoned, for ſo the word ſignifies, *that God was able to raiſe him up even from the dead: whence alſo he received him in a figure.* The birth of *Iſaac* was like receiving him from the dead,

dead, on account of the age of both his parents. Yet when it was foretold, *Abraham*, to uſe the words of St. *Paul, conſidered not his own body, now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadneſs of Sarah's womb*, but was *fully perſuaded, that what God had promiſed, he was able to perform**: and the event juſtified his faith. Encouraged by this, he now a ſecond time *againſt hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations*†. For that power, which had quickened the barren aged womb, could alſo quicken the lifeleſs duſt. It was only carrying on the ſame kind of wonderful interpoſition, that he had already ſeen begun. And thus did that very prediction, which might ſeem to create the moſt inſuperable difficulty, afford him a clew to extricate him out of all difficulty in point of argument, intirely. For if *Iſaac* was to have a poſterity, he muſt be raiſed again: and that would vindicate the command of God, and the patriarch's obedience, to all mankind‡.

Some have obſerved a yet farther circumſtance in the hiſtory; that God bade him *offer his ſon upon one of the mountains, which he ſhould tell him of*§: and hence they conclude, not improbably, that when it is ſaid, *he lift up his eyes the third day, and ſaw the place afar off*‖, he might have known it by ſome remarkable ſign from heaven, pointing it out to him. And this would be a new and moſt ſeaſonable confirmation, that he was doing what he ought. And ſuppoſing him at length to ſhew it *Iſaac* too, it might well produce in him that intire ſubmiſſion to ſo ſtrange a death, which may elſe look hardly credible. For he was unqueſtionably of age, to have attempted either reſiſtance or eſcape, ſince he was of age to carry the wood for the ſacrifice: yet he appears abſolutely reſigned; and ſeems to have been bound for no other reaſon, than becauſe victims uſually were. But ſtill he might have yielded himſelf up, not in conſequence of any immediate notification to him from above: but from mere dependance on his father's well known judgement and affection. It muſt have been from one of the

* Rom. iv. 19, 21. † Ver. 18.

‡ Neither *Philo* nor *Joſephus* intimate, that *Abraham* reaſoned thus. But the author of *Nizzachon vetus*, in *Wagenſeil*, p. 22. doth: who therefore probably borrowed this ſolution from the New Teſtament, or ſome chriſtian.

§ Gen. xxii. 2. ‖ Gen. xxii. 4.

two motives: and ſuppoſing it to be only from the latter and the weaker, it doth the higheſt honour to the characters of them both.

But a further and very ſtrong evidence of *Abraham*'s acting by divine command, was that which appeared in the cloſe of this wonderful tranſaction. If an evil and lying ſpirit, if a gloomy turn of mind, if an emulation of any barbarous heathen rite, had prompted him to deſign this act; they would have prompted him alſo to complete the execution of it, and never have let him ſtop ſhort juſt where he did. Nay, if theſe bad motives had influenced him, and in great mercy God had ſtopt him; he would ſurely at the ſame time have ſhewn him his error, inſtead of praiſing and rewarding him. And therefore his motives were not bad: but a wiſe and gracious being was the author of the command, as well as the diſpenſation.

But to ſee this yet more fully, let us conſider,

III. The improbability of its producing any hurtful effects in after days.

Men may indeed run mad, and think *Abraham*'s example authorizes them to kill their neareſt relation, or whom they will. And ſo they may run mad, and think the public good, or any thing elſe, authorizes them. But that any one ever did plead the precedent of *Abraham* for ſuch an action, I believe is not pretended. And plainly no one in his ſenſes can. *Abraham* was a public and extraordinary perſon: he was a ſovereign prince, and accountable to no power upon earth: he lived when divine revelations were frequent, had long been acquainted with the proper marks of them, and uſed to ſee them verified: his inclinations and his intereſt conſpired in the ſtrongeſt manner to preſerve him from miſtake: he knew by God's promiſe, that if he ſacrificed his child by God's order, he would ſoon riſe again: and at laſt he was not permitted to do, what merely for a trial, he was commanded: nor hath any human creature ever been commanded it ſince. How can this poſſibly be encouragement to a private and common man; ſubject, he and his whole family, to the laws of the ſociety, of which he is a member; born 4000 years after *Abraham* in a quite different ſtate of things; when no revelations are to be looked for, but all pretences to them ſuſpected in the higheſt degree; who hath had no experience of them, nor can gueſs

of

of what nature they ſhould be, if there were any: how can he dream of encouragement from hence, to commit a deed, contrary to the ſtanding rules of his own reaſon, of human authority, and of the word of God, merely becauſe he hath a ſtrong inclination to it, perhaps to ſerve ſome ſelfiſh or wild purpoſe, that he hath at heart?

Still ſome have alledged, that however plauſibly we may argue, in fact human ſacrifices began early in the world; and what could be ſo likely to give riſe, or, at leaſt, countenance to them, as this command? But, according to ſome old accounts, they began before it. And ſuppoſe they did not; ſtill, if any perſon had either learned them, or been reconciled to them from hence, it muſt ſurely have been *Abraham*'s poſterity. And yet we do not find, that ever any one of them, excepting the ſingle doubtful caſe of *Jephtha* 700 years after, ſo much as once thought of ſuch an offering to the God of their fathers. It was idols only, that they worſhipped thus; and they did it in imitation, not of *Abraham*, but of thoſe very *Canaanites*, whom they had been ordered to deſtroy for their wickedneſs, and expreſsly forbidden to follow in this act of it. *Take heed to thyſelf, that thou inquire not, ſaying, how did theſe nations ſerve their gods? Even ſo will I do likewiſe. For every abomination to the Lord, which he hateth, have they done: their ſons and their daughters have they burnt in the fire to their gods**. Nor did the *Canaanites* alone, but nations, that probably had never heard of *Abraham* or of them, offer ſuch victims. And therefore the cuſtom ſeems altogether the offspring either of diabolical deluſions, or of prieſtly tyranny, combined with groſs ignorance and frantic terror; ſuggeſting, that the moſt precious and moſt painful ſacrifices muſt be the moſt efficacious. But had any ever ſupported themſelves in this practice, by the hiſtory of *Abraham*, it muſt have been by the groſſeſt abuſe of that hiſtory: and every proceeding, every mercy of God, is liable to equal abuſe. A command of ſuch a nature, never given but once, and to one man, and then countermanded before execution, and clearly explained to be meant, neither for the averting of any danger, nor the expiation of any ſin, but merely for an extraordinary trial of that man's dutifulneſs, could not in reality make the actual performance

* Deut. xii. 30, 31.

formance of the thing, ſo commanded, a common uſage for quite different purpoſes: any more than *Solomon*'s order for *dividing the child in two** could make the performance of that a common uſage. Indeed the directly contrary concluſion was the natural one: that God approved not human victims; but only ſuch, as he had provided for *Abraham*, inſtead of his ſon. And if the computation of ſome chronologers be right, that, in a few years after this time, ſacrificing men was aboliſhed in that part of *Egypt*, which lay neareſt to *Abraham*'s reſidence: (where perhaps it was never taken up again) we ſhall have room to think the tranſaction, that we are now conſidering, might have a moſt happy conſequence, in that very reſpect, in which it is groundleſsly accuſed of having a bad one.

But thus I am got inſenſiby into what I propoſed to ſhew

IV. The good ends, which might be, and were, promoted by it.

Indeed, could we diſcover none, we are juſt as ignorant of the deſign of ſeveral things in God's creation: which appear, though certainly without reaſon, both uſeleſs and hurtful. But in the preſent caſe many valuable purpoſes are viſible and obvious.

This command was, in the firſt place, a noble manifeſtation of *Abraham*'s faith and obedience. The hardeſt of thoſe orders which he had received before, was very ſupportable: and they were accompanied with great promiſes of advantage; in particular of worldly advantage. This, on the other hand, was ſevere beyond expreſſion; and had no promiſe or conſolation at all annexed to it: but, inſtead of that, it enumerated to him the moſt cutting circumſtances, and placed them before him in the fulleſt light. *Take now thy ſon, thine only ſon, Iſaac, whom thou loveſt, and offer him up*†. Yet, pierced to the heart, as he muſt be, by theſe expreſſions, he dutifully ſubmitted; without ſeeking excuſes from any diſſuaſive reaſonings, without throwing on any one the leaſt ſhare of the burthen of his own anguiſh; without expoſing himſelf to the tender ſolicitations of *Sarah*; without acquainting *Iſaac* what was intended, before it became abſolutely needful. How aſtoniſhingly

* 1 Kings iii. 25. † Gen. xxii. 2.

ly great, how compoſed, how conſiderate a ſelf-denial was this!

Yet further, the piteous deed was not to be done immediately, whilſt the impreſſion of the divine voice was ſounding freſh in his ears, and excluded every other ſentiment; but at the diſtance of three whole days: during which every feeling of paternal affection would return in full force; and even the inferior conſideration of what his family and the world would think, and ſay to ſo unnatural an action, if *Iſaac* did not riſe again inſtantly, as there was no proof he would, muſt ſingly have a weight very hard to be ſupported. Nor were theſe days to be ſpent in retirement, in meditation and prayer, to fortify his reſolution; but altogether in the company of the dear object, whom he was to ſlay; whoſe converſation would be in a thouſand inſtances the more moving, as he went along with him unſuſpicious of what was to follow: and whoſe innocent queſtion at laſt, *my father, behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering**, muſt, one ſhould think, have completed the melting down of all human reſolution. But *wiſdom preſerved him*, as the book of *Wiſdom* expreſſes it†, *blameleſs unto God, and kept him ſtrong againſt his tender compaſſion towards his ſon*: till now, when the ſacrifice of the mind was made to the utmoſt, and only the outward act was wanting, the *hand* being *ſtretched forth*‡ even for that; the goodneſs of the Almighty broke forth on a ſudden, like the ſun from behind a black cloud concealing it, *and the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and ſaid, lay not thine hand upon the lad: for now I know that thou feareſt God, ſeeing thou haſt not withheld thy ſon, thine only ſon, from me*§, The tranſport of hearing theſe words muſt have made in a moment large amends for the preceding pangs. *Iſaac* was reſtored to him without going through *the bitterneſs of death*‖: reproach and miſconſtruction was avoided: the dreadful deed diſpenſed with: the willing mind accepted: and a ſolemn approbation pronounced over him from above, anticipating the final ſentence, *well done, good and faithful ſervant*¶.

Indeed, before this, God had declared, *I know Abraham***. But now he knew him by a new proof: and, which is the conſtant

* Gen. xxii. 7. † Wiſd. x. 5. ‡ Gen. xxii. 10.
§ Ver. 11, 12. ‖ 1 Sam. xv. 32. ¶ Matth. xxv. 21.
** Gen. xviii. 19.

ſtant ſcripture ſenſe of his trying any one, he manifeſted him by the trial, to angels, to men, to himſelf: *and experience wrought* in him ſure *hope not to be aſhamed* upon any future occaſion, *becauſe the love of God was thus ſhed abroad in his heart**. A further diſcovery was, and a very delightful one it muſt be, that, by ſo deciſive an experiment of *Iſaac*'s piety, his father knew him to be worthy of his utmoſt affection; and worthy of the choice, which God had made of him, to ſupport religion, and be the progenitor of the promiſed ſeed.

Nor did this trial convey only improvement, and comfort, and reward here and hereafter, to *Abraham*: but uſeful inſtruction to others alſo. Hence it appeared, that the ſervants of the true deity were as ready to perform his hardeſt commands, as thoſe of falſe ones could be to obey theirs: but that he did not require of them to *give their firſt-born for their tranſgreſſion, the fruit of their body for the ſin of their ſoul; but to do juſtly, and to love mercy, and walk humbly with their God*†. Hence alſo it appeared, that God was not partial in his choice of the *Jews* to be his peculiar people: but properly fixed on that nation, where the moſt illuſtrious inſtances of religious obedience had been given; for which this prerogative, granted them, was a fit recompence; beſides that the influence of ſuch examples and teachers of it, afforded a greater probability of its laſting there, than any where elſe.

Hence likewiſe we may all of us learn, what is yet more material, not to fear making uſe of our reaſon in religion, for *Abraham* uſed his on the point before us; but ſtill to make a ſober and modeſt uſe of it: to believe and do what we plainly ſee is taught and commanded, though neither the particulars of the doctrine, nor the grounds of the precept, be at all clear; and not to reject haſtily and raſhly what we read in ſcripture concerning occaſional directions given formerly from above, though it be difficult to account for ſome of them at preſent. We may learn further, that the *victory, which overcometh the world is our faith*‡ but that we are to ſhew our faith by our works§, as St. *James* obſerves *Abraham* ſhewed his¶; not thinking our own preſſures heavier, and our own virtue in bearing them greater

* Rom. v. 3, 4, 5. † Mic. vi. 7, 8. ‡ 1 John v. 4.
§ James ii. 18. ¶ Ver. 21.

greater, than any ones elſe ever were; but joining humility with reſignation. And laſtly, we may learn to obey God cheerfully in the moſt unwelcome injunctions, and truſt him boldly in the moſt inextricable perplexities: which laſt we find was an ancient leſſon, founded on this narration. For, from *Abraham*'s ſaying to *Iſaac*, *God will provide*, (in the *Hebrew* it is *ſee for*) *a lamb**, the place received its name, *Jehovah jireh*, and a proverb its riſe, *in the mount of the Lord it ſhall be ſeen*†: that is, in the very extremity, if not before, proviſion will be made. And indeed, as this part of the patriarch's hiſtory is recorded in the earlieſt book of the bible; it is impoſſible to ſay, of how frequent uſe, or how great upon the whole, it may have been, from his own time downwards, to good perſons in all ages of the church, *Jewiſh* and *Chriſtian*, under public afflictions and private. But evidently it may be of unſpeakable benefit to us, if we ſet but our hearts to *walk in the ſteps of his faith*‡, in hope of being *bleſſed with faithful Abraham*§, who is *the father of all them, that believe*‖.

Many however may ſtill object, with too much truth, that his pattern, though they allow it to be an excellent one, is one that they could never follow, were they ever ſo plainly commanded. But then, be thankful at leaſt, that you are not commanded: and be aſſured you never will. Admire and honour, but never think of blaming, him that was able to do ſo much; and by that method, amongſt others, excite yourſelves to do what you are called to. Since, through divine grace, he bore ſo amazing a trial, the ſame grace can ſurely ſtrengthen you to bear common ones: and you may well ſubmit contentedly, if your deareſt bleſſing is taken from you, ſince he was willing to ſacrifice his with his own hand; comforting himſelf, as you may too, by the full aſſurance of a future reſurrection. *For if we believe, that Jeſus died and roſe again: them alſo, which ſleep in Jeſus, will God bring with him*¶.

And this leads me to one view more of the ſacrifice of *Iſaac*: the reſemblance it hath to that of Chriſt. No wonder it was ſo extraordinary a tranſaction in itſelf, if it was intended to prefigure the moſt extraordinary and myſterious one, that the world ever ſaw: as the agreeing circumſtances prove

* Gen. xxii. 8. † Ver. 14. ‡ Rom. iv. 12.
§ Gal iii. 6. ‖ Rom. iv. 11. ¶ 1 Theſſ. iv. 14.

it muſt. In both caſes you ſee a good and kind father cauſing his beloved, only, and innocent ſon to ſuffer death. *Iſaac* was heir to the promiſes of the temporal *Canaan*: through Chriſt we claim the inheritance of the heavenly. *Iſaac* carried the wood, on which he was bound, in order to be offered up*: Chriſt carried the croſs†, on which he was afterwards nailed, and put to death. The place where God appointed the former ſhould die, and where the latter died actually, was the very ſame; *the land of Moriah*‡, that is, of God manifeſted; on one of the mountains of which the temple ſtood; on another, our Saviour's croſs. The term of three days too is remarkably ſpecified in each hiſtory§. *The lamb*, which *Abraham* ſaid, *God would provide*‖, naturally turns our thoughts to him whom the Baptiſt calls the Lamb of God¶; and the ram ſubſtituted for *Iſaac***, to the temple-ſacrifices of animals, types of the atonement of Chriſt. Then laſtly, the mountain where proviſion was made for *Abraham*'s diſtreſs, deſerved its name infinitely better, on account of God's providing there for the redemption of mankind.

Theſe

* Gen. xxii. 6. † John xix. 17.

‡ Gen. xxii. 2. 2 *Chr.* iii. 1. ſaith, the temple was built on Mount *Moriah*, where the Lord appeared to *David*. *Joſeph. Ant.* l. 1. c. 13. §. 2, 3, ſaith, that Μωριου ορους where the temple was afterwards built was the place where *Abraham* was directed to offer *Iſaac*. The book of *Cozri*, p. 85. ſaith the ſame thing. *Jerom. Qu. Heb.* in *Gen.* xxii. 2. ſaith of the *Hebrews* in general, that they affirm it. Yet *Tillotſon*, in the end of his ſermon on this text, mentions him, as ſaying from an ancient and conſtant tradition of the *Jews*, that *Moriah* was *Calvary*. But he ſpecifies not the place. *Reland Pal.* p. 852. ſaith, "Mons Mo-"ria 2 *Chr.* iii. 1. diſtingui omnino debet a regione Moria, in qua Deus "montem aliquem (erant enim plures in illa regione) ſe monſtraturum "Abrahamo dicit, ubi filium ſuum offerat." But I think he doth not mention the land of *Moriah* elſewhere. Nor doth he explain here, whether he meant any more, than that the mountain was to be diſtinguiſhed from the land as a part from the whole. He ſaith, p. 854. that *Moriah* was a part of *Sion*, and p. 860. that *Euſeb* and *Jerom* in *Onomaſtico* place *Golgotha* to the north of *Sion*. And they do but ſay nothing there of *Moriah*. *Vitr. Obſ. Sacr.* l. 2. c. 10. §. 8 p. 397, 398. thinks the whole tract of country, in which *Zion*, *Calvary*, &c. were, was called the land of *Moriah*.

§ The following words are quoted from the ancient *Jewiſh* book, *Bereſchith Rabba: there are many ſpaces of three days in ſcripture, one of which is the Reſurrection of the Meſſiah.* It is not in the preſent copies: but probably was in the ancient. See *Schoettg. de Meſſia*, l. 6. c. 5. § 5.

‖ Gen. xxii. 8. ¶ John i. 29. 34. ** Gen. xxii. 13.

Theſe things the patriarch indeed could not underſtand, unleſs they were revealed to him: for the likeneſs of two objects cannot be decerned, till both appear. Perhaps he was told the intent, and thus *ſaw the day* of Chriſt *and was glad**. How gracious an ending of ſo terrifying a diſpenſation! But however that were, we now may juſtly conclude, that what he then required *Abraham* to do for him, he had purpoſed from eternity, in the counſel of unſearchable wiſdom, to do for his loſt creatures. And, let the comforting reflection dwell with you, *He that ſpared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how ſhall he not with him alſo freely give us all things†?*

* John viii. 56. † Rom. viii. 32.

SERMON LXXXII.

The Presumption of Prying into Religious Mysteries.

Deut. xxix. 29.

The ſecret things belong unto the Lord our God: but thoſe things, which are revealed, belong unto us and to our children for ever; that we may do all the words of this law.

It is one material conſideration, amongſt many, in favour of the *Jewiſh* and *Chriſtian* ſcriptures, that they preſerve throughout ſo due a medium in the diſcoveries, which they make, of divine truths, as to direct the faith and practice of men without indulging their curioſity. The writings of enthuſiaſts would of courſe have been overrun with myſteries: and much fuller of explanations, that would make them ſtill more obſcure, than of the plain doctrines of piety and morals. Impoſtors would never have neglected to recommend themſelves by doing us ſo ſingular a pleaſure, as that of letting us into all the arcana of heaven. Both would have entertained us, as they very ſafely might, with long and aſtoniſhing accounts of the eſſence of God, the orders and employments of inviſible beings, of the counſels of providence in the government both of them and us, of the particulars in which the future happineſs and miſery of man will conſiſt. Now on the contrary, of theſe matters holy writ gives no other than brief, imperfect, general notices: and thoſe merely in ſubſervience to the far leſs agreeable ſubjects, of our duties to God, each other, and ourſelves.

Thus it delivers predictions of future events: not for the vain amuſement of the inquiſitive: but partly for direction, warning, or encouragement to particular nations and ages: partly to eſtabliſh the truth of revelation, in all nations and ages,

ages, by their accompliſhment. It contains alſo ſupernatural doctrines: but ſuch only, as make the ground-work, more or leſs, of our obligations, or our hopes. Theſe it was evidently requiſite for us to know: and accordingly they are notified to us: but without any art uſed to render the ſtrangeſt of them plauſible, or any care taken to gratify us with full information about them, or to ſhew us why it is withheld. The articles of belief are laid down with the utmoſt ſimplicity: our aſſent to them is required on the teſtimony of God: and when once we have been told enough to regulate our practice, we are only told farther, that *faith without works is dead* *, A grievous diſappointment to our wiſhes undoubtedly: but ſtill our reaſon muſt allow, that this is the proper conduct of the Lord of all to his creatures: and we find it to be his perpetual conduct from the beginning of the Bible to the end. What our correſponding duty is, we are taught in ſeveral places; but no where ſo diſtinctly and fully, as in the text: which conveys as neceſſary inſtruction, to this day, as it did originally, though relating in part to different points. And happy would men always have been made, and happy might they become yet, by the obſervance of its rules. Theſe are,

I. That we ſhould never pry into matters, which infinite wiſdom hath concealed. For *the ſecret things belong unto the Lord our God.*

II. That we ſhould receive with attentive humility whatever it communicates. For *thoſe things, which are revealed, belong to us and to our children for ever.*

III. That we ſhould allow every divine truth its due influence on our behaviour. For we are to learn them, *that we may do all the words of this law.*

Theſe are the maxims, which ought to be eſtabliſhed in our minds, before we examine into any particular doctrine: and the previous thought, how particular doctrines will be affected by them, ought to be avoided, as far as is poſſible. They ſhould be explained without partiality, embraced without jealouſy, and their genuine conſequences admitted, whatever they may prove to be.

I. That

* James ii. 20.

I. That we ſhould never pry into matters, which infinite wiſdom hath concealed. For we ſhall ſeldom, if at all, be wiſer for ſuch inquiries: we ſhall never be happier or better: and we ſhall uſually be more wretched, and leſs innocent.

In what reaſon or experience diſcovers to us, farther ſpeculations or trials may produce new diſcoveries. But of articles depending on mere revelation, as we could have diſcerned nothing without it, we ſhall be able to diſcern very little, of any thing, beyond it. In the ſhorteſt and ſeemingly moſt obvious conſequences, drawn concerning ſubjects, that lie naturally out of our reach, we muſt be exceedingly liable to miſtakes: and venturing far into the dark, is the ſure way to ſtumble. Another ſtate may probably withdraw the veil, and acquaint us clearly and familiarly with what now perplexes our reaſonings, and wearies our conjectures. Let us wait then contentedly for the time, which of neceſſity we muſt wait for: and apply to ourſelves the comfort, which our Saviour gave St. *Peter* on a different occaſion, *what I do thou knoweſt not now; but thou ſhalt know hereafter**. Yet even then, truths will remain, the full comprehenſion of which muſt for ever be impoſſible, not only to us, but to the higheſt creatures of that almighty being, one of whoſe diſtinctions, inculcated in ſcripture, is, *God only wiſe* †. His nature and attributes being unlimited, his works and providence reaching through immenſity and eternity, the greateſt advances of finite beings, muſt be infinitely diſtant from a complete underſtanding of them. *Canſt thou by ſearching find out God? Canſt thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven: what canſt thou do? deeper than hell; what canſt thou know? the meaſure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the ſea* ‡.

But could inquiry add more to our knowledge than it can: would it increaſe our happineſs? We meet with difficulties, and ſhould be glad of ſolutions: we enter a little way into a ſubject; ſee that vaſtly more lies behind, and earneſtly long to be maſters of it. But if we were ſo, are we at all ſure, whether freſh doubts and queſtions, more embarraſſing perhaps than the preſent, might not immediately ariſe from thence? We find it ſo in the viſible world, where we had leſs ground to

* John xiii. 7. † Rom. xvi. 27, 1 Tim. i. 17. Jude 25.
‡ Job. xi. 7, 8, 9.

to expect it. New facts are daily obſerved, new properties of bodies diſcovered, new deductions made from them: and what is the conſequence? Why, that the ſcheme of things appears deeper and leſs fathomable, for every ſtep we take in hopes of getting to the bottom of it. In all likelihood therefore the ſame is the caſe of the ſpiritual world too: and, by knowing more of it, we ſhould be farther from being ſatisfied than ever, if our ſatisfaction depends on knowing all. The ſyſtem of religion is fully taught us by common reaſon, and the plain parts of ſcripture. The defence of it is conducted moſt prudently by owning our ignorance where we are ignorant, which gives no advantages; whereas affectation of the contrary gives many. The practice of it conſiſts, not in filling our heads with unneceſſary ſpeculations, but applying our hearts to neceſſary duties. The rewards of it are annexed to believing and doing what is required of us: and how can we be the better then for aiming at more?

Indeed we ſhall ſcarcely avoid being much the worſe. By engaging in matters, of which we are unqualified to judge, we ſhall be in danger of judging materially wrong; either miſtaking the nature, or even denying the truth of religion, like thoſe of old, who *profeſſing themſelves to be wiſe, became fools**. And the errors, into which we may thus fall, will be the leſs excuſable, as they will proceed from our own raſhneſs. Beſides, the more intent perſons are on purſuing their theories, the leſs time, and uſually the leſs concern, they will have for performing their obligations: excepting, it may be, ſome fanciful ones, which they have built on their imagined diſcoveries: reſembling thoſe *worſhippers of angels*, whom St. *Paul* charges with *intruding into things, which they had not ſeen, being vainly puffed up by their fleſhly minds*†. Superfluous inquiſitiveneſs is indeed ſometimes accompanied with exceſſive diffidence: and then, though leſs criminal, it produces moſt tormenting anxieties. But commonly it proceeds from a degree of that irreverent vanity, which poſſeſſed our parent *Eve*, and coſt mankind ſo dear, of invading ſuch knowledge, as God hath reſerved to himſelf, inſtead of acquieſcing cheerfully in ſo much as he hath imparted.

Then

* Rom. i. 22. † Col. ii. 18.

Then with this undutiful ſpirit eaſily aſſociates itſelf a ſtill more miſchievous one, of uncharitableneſs and ſpiritual tyranny. For when once men are aſſuming enough to determine, out of their own inventions, things, which their Maker hath not determined, the next natural ſtep is, to *contend* for them far more *earneſtly*, than for *the faith once delivered to the ſaints**: caſting off chriſtian love, refuſing communion or toleration, and too often renouncing common humanity, to all who differ from them. And therefore the apoſtle gives *Timothy*, at the ſame time, theſe two directions: *Follow righteouſneſs, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But fooliſh and unlearned queſtions* (and nothing is more *unlearned*, than diſputing in the dark) *avoid; knowing that they do gender ſtrifes*†.

On all accounts then we ſhould keep cloſe to plain reaſon and plain ſcripture: let our aſſent be determinate, as far as they are undeniably ſo; but make no deciſion concerning what is doubtful, invent no groundleſs hypotheſis to clear up what is obſcure, nor carry on too long chains of argument from what ſeems the moſt evident. I conclude this head with that excellent advice of the ſon of *Sirach*. *Seek not out the things that are too hard for thee*, neither ſearch *the things that are above thy ſtrength. But what is commanded thee, think thereupon with reverence: for it is not needful for thee to ſee with thine eyes the things which are in ſecret*‡. *Be not curious in unneceſſary matters: for more things are ſhewed unto thee, than men underſtand. Many are deceived by their own vain opinion: and an evil ſuſpicion hath overthrown their judgment. Without eyes thou ſhalt want light: profeſs not therefore the knowledge that thou haſt not*§.

II. The next rule, which *Moſes* gives, is that we ſhould receive, with attentive humility, whatever infinite wiſdom communicates to us. *For thoſe things, which are revealed, belong to us and to our children for ever.*

Indeed let any propoſition be delivered to us, as coming from God or from man, we can believe it no farther than we underſtand it: and therefore if we do not underſtand it at all, we cannot

* Jude 3. † 2 Tim. ii. 22, 23. ‡ The *Greek* hath it, more briefly and expreſſively, thus: *For of the hidden things thou haſt no need.*
§ Eccluſ iii. 21,—25.

cannot believe it at all; I mean, explicitly: but only be perſuaded, that it contains ſome truth or other, though we know not what. Again, were any doctrine laid down, which we clearly ſaw to be ſelf-contradictory, or otherwiſe abſurd, that could never be an object of our faith. For there is no poſſibility of admitting, upon any authority, a thing for true, which we evidently perceive to be falſe. Nor would calling ſuch doctrines myſterious mend the matter in the leaſt. For indeed there is no myſtery in them: they are as plain, as any in nature; as plainly contrary to truth, as any thing elſe is agreeable to it.

But if our aſſent be required to a propoſition, which hath ſome meaning and no inconſiſtency in it, and is undeniably aſſerted in a revelation well proved: but only we have no other evidence for it; nor ſhould of ourſelves ever have imagined any ſuch thing, indeed ſhould have thought it very unlikely; and ſtill cannot thoroughly comprehend it; or diſcover, or ſo much as gueſs at, the reaſons, the manner, the circumſtances, of what we are taught: all this is abſolutely no foundation for diſbelieving it. Nay, though we ſhould ſee difficulties and objections againſt it, which we could not particularly anſwer, we ſhould allow them only their proper weight: which may be far overbalanced by the general atteſtations given of its divine authority.

For that God is able to communicate many important truths to us, which we have no means of knowing otherwiſe, concerning his own nature, his deſigns and diſpenſations, concerning the inhabitants of the inviſible world, and our future ſtate in it, can no more be doubted, than whether we ourſelves, according to our various knowledge of men and things, are able to give unexpected and ſerviceable notices one to another. And that we ſhould underſtand nothing farther of his ſecrets than is unfolded to us, nor be capable of anſwering many queſtions, that may be aſked about them, otherwiſe than by confeſſing our ignorance, is ſo far from being a plea againſt their being really his, that it is a neceſſary conſequence of it: ſo far from being ſtrange in ſupernatural things, that it is common in natural ones. In ſeveral articles of revealed religion, we believe things of which we know not the manner or the reaſons. But is it there alone, that we do ſo? In the whole of God's creation, what do we meet with, that is not, more or

leſs, of the ſame ſort? We know not the eſſence of our own mind, nor the preciſe diſtinctions of its ſeveral faculties: and why then ſhould we hope to comprehend, or deny becauſe we cannot comprehend, the perſonal characters, which, we are told, exiſt in the ſubſtance of the Godhead? We know not, how *the ſoul and fleſh is one man*: what wonder if we know not, how *God and man is one Chriſt* *? We are ignorant how the viciſſitudes of day and night, ſummer and winter, are produced: how the fruits of the earth nouriſh us: how bodies cohere, or impel each other: how our ſeveral ſenſations are performed? how we move an hand or an eye, though it is our own doing. Familiar as theſe things are; the manner of them, when examined to the bottom, hath obſcurities, which the moſt learned will never penetrate. *I beheld*, ſaith the preacher, *all the work of God,—that is done under the ſun. Though a man labour to ſeek it out, yet ſhall he not find it: yea farther, though a wiſe man think to know it, yet ſhall he not be able* †. Surely then we may content ourſelves to act in matters of faith, as in thoſe of ſenſe: and believe what we do underſtand, the thing itſelf in general; though many circumſtances remain, which we underſtand not, and therefore are not required to believe any thing in relation to them ‡.

Again: in the frame of nature and the ſcheme of providence we diſcern indeed evident proofs of wiſdom and goodneſs: but with innumerable particulars intermixed, which we perceive not to be at all uſeful, or the creation any way the better for them. Yet we never think of excepting theſe from amongſt the works of God: never doubt of their having a real, though unknown, ſubſerviency to valuable ends. Why, juſt ſo in the goſpel-revelation: look upon the general plan, and it is undeniably adapted to promote the divine honour, and human virtue and happineſs: but how ſome points are conducive to them, we ſee leſs clearly, or perhaps not at all. Yet ſtill, as they are parts of a ſyſtem confeſſedly good, and clearly proved; and we cannot expect to comprehend all the ſecret connexions and references in God's moral government of us, which extends to eternity, and may extend to worlds far out of our ſight;

it

* *Ath.* Creed. † Eccl. viii. 17.

‡ Ubi igitur aut qualis eſt iſta mens? [divina] ubi tua, aut qualis? poteſne dicere? An ſi omnia ad intelligendum non habeo, quæ habere vellem? ne iis quidem, quæ habeo, mihi per te uti licebit? *Cic. Tuſc. Diſp.* l. 28.

ſt is unreaſonable beyond expreſſion, to refuſe believing any thing, till we know the ground of every thing: and to deny that implicit faith to our Maker in ſome few inſtances, which we are obliged in ſo many to have in one another. Scornful rejection of doctrines, that have all the outward marks of his authority, merely becauſe we cannot inveſtigate the inward reaſons or complete ſcheme of them, would be ſhocking irreverence in the higheſt of his creatures: and much worſe doth it become our low rank of being, and the lamentable weakneſs of our degenerate faculties. *Hardly do we gueſs aright at things, that are upon earth; and with labour do we find the things, that are before us: but the things that are in heaven, who hath ſearched out? And thy counſel who hath known, except thou give wiſdom, and ſend thy Holy Spirit from above* [*].

Further yet: ſhould a revelation contain aſſertions, that appear in themſelves unlikely; and liable to objections, that we are at a loſs how to ſolve: even this, though perhaps it might juſtly in certain caſes, weaken our aſſent, yet would by no means be ſufficient to prevent or deſtroy it. Some difficulties may perplex us, merely for want of the knowledge, that other men have. Some ſubjects, as far as we can judge, have difficulties on every poſſible ſuppoſition: which therefore, lying equally againſt all, cannot be urged againſt any one in particular: for ſomething muſt be true. Many points, which our own reaſon proves to us, for example, concerning the attributes of God, natural and moral, are embarraſſed with perplexities belonging to them, as hard to be unravelled, as any thing that ſcripture teaches, on theſe or any other heads. Indeed whenever a finite mind hath an infinite object before it; or one, which, though limited, is too large for its graſp, the moſt accurate arguments upon it, will thwart one another. Throughout the material world are facts, of which, on proper teſtimony, we are very juſtly perſuaded, though we cannot anſwer half the objections, that a ſubtle reaſoner may bring againſt them. Concerning the free actions of our own minds, doubts have been raiſed, which, I believe, no man pretends he can remove. In the wiſeſt conduct of any worldly affair, ſteps may be taken, for which they can never account, who are acquainted with it only in part. And ſurely much leſs ought we to think of having the

[*] Wiſd. ix. 16.

them. Our performance of theſe obligations, as it was the true motive to the delivery of each article, is the juſt meaſure of our belief in it. If we know enough of the myſterious doctrines in religion, to fulfil thoſe duties, of which they are each reſpectively the foundation, our knowledge, however imperfect, is ſufficient. And if thoſe duties remain unfulfilled, the completeſt knowledge will not avail us. Nor indeed will the completeſt practice of ſuch duties alone: for we muſt *do all the words of* God's *law* *: and the plainer any part of it is, the leſs excuſable the neglect of it will be. Our firſt and moſt evident, and therefore ſtrongeſt obligations are to the dictates of our inward nature. Other things are neceſſary for ſuch as have the means of being acquainted with them. But theſe lie within the reach of all men; and all ſhould obſerve them preferably to whatever can be matter of diſpute. Living agreeably to clear rules is the method of obtaining light into thoſe, which are obſcure. For, *if any man will do his will, he ſhall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God* †: whereas it is no wonder, that they, who *put away a good conſcience; concerning faith make ſhipwreck* ‡. Or however orthodox any man's belief may be, if his life be bad, as he fails in one eſſential part of anſwering the deſign of the goſpel, he muſt fail of the rewards, and incur the puniſhments of it.

But, though every inſtance of chriſtian behaviour will be indiſpenſably required of thoſe, who make profeſſion of chriſtianity: yet one deſerves particular mention, ſince the apoſtle hath mentioned it particularly in relation to the preſent ſubject. *Though I underſtand all myſteries and all knowledge, and have all faith,—and have no charity, I am nothing* §. Now this virtue is a very comprehenſive one: but ſo far as it belongs peculiarly to the matter before us, it conſiſts in diſpoſing us to gentle treatment of thoſe who differ from us in points of ſpeculation, and of conſequent practice; eſpecially when ſuch points are either doubtful in themſelves, or perplexed by the arts of controverſy, or when men are unfitted by involuntary prejudices to judge rightly concerning them. We muſt indeed think as we apprehend reaſon and ſcripture to direct us, both of the importance of things, and the conduct of men. On proper

* Deut. xxvii. 26. † John vii. 17. ‡ 1 Tim. i. 19.
§ 1 Cor. xiii. 2.

proper occaſions too our opinion muſt be declared. We are by no means to acknowledge, either in our words or actions, thoſe for ſound believers, whom we conceive not to be ſuch: nor to ſhow indifference about doctrines, which appear to us of moment to the ſalvation of mankind. Errors may proceed from as blameable a temper, and produce as miſchievous effects, as the groſſeſt immoralities. And we may deem and pronounce a man's condition to be dangerous on account of his errors; yet have the trueſt good-will and compaſſion for him; nay, and the higheſt regard in other reſpects.

But if we are haſty in ſuſpecting, or unfair or only rigorous in interpreting, vehement or artful in cenſuring, or inwardly pleaſed with thinking harſhly: then begins that inhuman ſin of uncharitableneſs; againſt which we ought to guard ourſelves, by recollecting every circumſtance, that can make in favour of our brethren. Sometimes men appear to differ, when they do not: or to differ much more widely, than they do: their expreſſions vary ſtrangely, and perhaps are quite oppoſite; when, had they but coolneſs and clearneſs enough to underſtand one another, they mean, at leaſt very nearly, the ſame thing. And this conſideration ſhould induce us to interpret with candor the words of thoſe, who may appear to depart from the eſtabliſhed doctrines: but then ſurely they in return ought to interpret with at leaſt equal candor the forms, in which the eſtabliſhed doctrines are, and long have been, profeſſed in the church of Chriſt. But farther: though a perſon may be in a palpable error, poſſibly it may be ſuch, as no exceedingly bad conſequences will attend: or though the article be important, it may not be eſſential. Or, however fundamental he may err in one point, he may agree with us in all or moſt others; nay, be as zealous for them, as we are: and ſome kind notice ought to be taken of that.

Beſides, let his errors reach to ever ſo many and material points; yet, to make him perſonally criminal in any conſiderable degree, he muſt not only have had ſuch means of information, as are ſtrictly ſpeaking, ſufficient; but his rejection of thoſe means, or failure of being influenced by them, muſt have ariſen from a worſe cauſe, than mere human fallibility, or ſuch inattention and prepoſſeſſion as are incident to the better ſort of minds. For when theſe alone miſlead him, he hath good ground ſurely for an humble hope, that his gracious Maker will

will not impute to him for ſin, the faults of which he was ignorantly guilty. Still the miſtakes, even of ſuch a one, may be greatly detrimental to ſociety, to virtue, to religion: and therefore the public warning of general denunciations againſt them, may both be uſeful and requiſite, and ſuch denunciations are far from deſerving to be condemned as uncharitable. But then they muſt be underſtood, like moſt other general expreſſions, with due limitations. And, before we can apply them to particular perſons, there are ſo many unknown circumſtances to be taken into the account, and ſo many allowances to be made, which, without ſeeing into the heart, cannot be made juſtly, that the rational, as well as chriſtian, rule is, not to *judge another man's ſervant.* Our concern is, to believe and act right, ourſelves: as for thoſe around us, *to their own maſter they ſtand or fall,* and we ſhould be very backward to caſt thoſe out, whom perhaps *God will receive* *. Or, however bad an opinion we may conceive any peculiar aggravations oblige us to entertain of their future condition in the next world; or, however neceſſary we may judge it, *after a firſt and ſecond admonition to reject* † them from communion with us; we are bound by the moſt ſacred ties, neither to do them any private, nor procure them any public, injury or hardſhip; but uſe them with all poſſible prudent mildneſs and tenderneſs: which is likely to reclaim them if any thing can: and ſhould it not, they will ſurely remain objects of pity, as well as diſlike.

Theſe are the rules, which plainly ſuit our preſent ſtate of imperfection. And may the careful obſervation of them bring us all ſafely to a better: wherein, *that which is perfect being come, that which is in part ſhall be done away. For now we ſee through a glaſs darkly; but then face to face; now we know in part; but then ſhall we know as alſo we are known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, theſe three: but the greateſt of theſe is charity* ‡.

* Rom. xiv. 3, 4. † Tit. iii. 10. ‡ 1 Cor. xiii. 10, 12, 13.

SER.

SERMON LXXXIII.

OUR SAVIOUR'S COMMAND TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE WORLD, AND THE RATIONAL MANNER OF ITS PROPAGATION.

MATTH. xxviii. 19, 20.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghoſt. Teaching them to obſerve all things, whatſoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

THESE words contain that great commiſſion and charter, granted by our Saviour to his apoſtles and their ſucceſſors, by virtue of which we and all mankind have been called to the knowledge and practice of true religion, inforced by the motives of eternal felicity or miſery. As it had been chiefly in *Galilee*, that he inſtructed his diſciples before his death: ſo he appointed them to retire thither after his reſurrection, that he might add to his inſtructions whatever then became proper; and more fully acquaint them with ſuch things, as *pertained to the kingdom of God**. There, our Evangeliſt informs us, he appeared to them on a mountain: perhaps the ſame, on which he had begun to open the doctrine of chriſtianity, in that noble diſcourſe, which we have in the fifth and following chapters of this goſpel; and given them a ſpecimen of his and their future glory, at his transfiguration†. *When they ſaw him* the generality immediately *worſhipped him*: *but ſome*, we are told with the uſual fairneſs of the ſacred writers, *doubted*‡. Whether theſe were only perſons, who accompanied the apoſtles, and had

* Acts i. 3. † Grot. in Loc. ſaith, There is ancient tradition for the laſt. See Reland Palæſt. p. 334, &c. ‡ v. 17.

had not yet ſeen him ſince he roſe again: or whether ſome of the apoſtles themſelves, who might not with certainty know him at a diſtance, is not clear. But the doubts of either could not but vaniſh, when *Jeſus came up* to them, as St. *Matthew* aſſures us he did, for ſo the original word ſignifies*, and converſed familiarly with them. Many ſuch converſations he held with theſe his followers: for St. *Luke* in their acts informs us, that they continued *forty days*†. But the ſubſtance of them all muſt be, what the text expreſſes: where, in conſequence of that fullneſs of *power*, which he tells them in the foregoing words, was *given him* over all things *in heaven and in earth*, *as the Father had ſent him, he ſends them*‡, to *make diſciples* for that is the more accurate rendering§, not of the Jews alone, but of *all nations*. And that they may do it rightly and effectually, he diſtinctly ſets forth,

I. The doctrines, they were to teach.

II. The duties, they were to enjoin.

III. The protection and happineſs, of which they might aſſure, both themſelves, and all thoſe, who faithfully preached his goſpel, and who ſincerely embraced it.

I. The doctrines they were to teach. Theſe are briefly, but ſufficiently, comprehended in the direction of *baptizing* men *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghoſt*: for the better underſtanding of which phraſe, it will be proper to explain,

1. What is meant by being *baptized in the name* of any one, and particularly of theſe three.

2. What is the faith in theſe three, which our baptiſm requires us to profeſs.

1. For the completer apprehenſion of the former of theſe points, it will be uſeful to obſerve, that in our Saviour's days, it had been an ancient cuſtom amongſt the Jews, when any Gentile forſook idolatry, and believed the law of *Moſes*, to receive him into their religion, amongſt other ceremonies, by baptiſm: as indeed they had themſelves been prepared for the reception

* Προσελθων, v. 18. † Acts i. 3. ‡ John xx. 21.

§ Μαθητευω is not uſed in the Septuagint: nor Μαθητης. In the New Teſtament it is found thrice, beſides in the text: and ſignifies to make diſciples, Acts xiv. 21. to be a diſciple, Matth. xxvii. 57. and in the paſſive voice may ſignify, to be made a diſciple, Matth. xiii. 52. It ſignifies alſo in Plutarch, to be a diſciple. See Steph. in Voc.

reception of that law, by a solemn and religious washing, as we read Exod. xix. Nay even the heathens made use of purifications by water, when they initiated, or entered, any one into the mysteries of their deities. And this rite being not only thus universally used, but also naturally expressive of those two things, which, on professing christianity, chiefly wanted to be expressed: a promise, on our part, carefully to preserve ourselves pure, from the defilement of sin, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit; and a promise, on God's part, graciously to consider us, as pure from the guilt of it, through the merits of his Son: therefore our blessed Lord condescended to make this the form of entering into his religion also. But at the same time, he thoroughly distinguished the christian baptism, both from that of the heathens, who were baptized into superstitions and idolatrous follies; and from that of the Jewish proselytes, who were baptized, as the apostle expresses it, into *Moses**, by directing that his followers should be *baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

In the language of scripture, doing any thing in the name of God, signifies doing it by virtue of his authority. Thus our Saviour saith to the Jews, *I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: If another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive*†. In this sense baptism is administered in the name of the Holy Trinity, being a divine appointment, with a distinct reference to each of the three persons. And in this sense the phrase appears to have been used by St. *Peter*, when he *commanded* the family of *Cornelius to be baptized in the name of the Lord*‡; that is, by virtue of his commission *to baptize all nations.* Till that day, the apostles had understood this only concerning Jews and proselytes of all nations. But now, St. *Peter* being sent by express revelation to *Cornelius*, a Gentile; and perceiving, in the midst of his discourse to him and his friends, that, on their believing, *the Holy Ghost was fallen upon them*§, Gentiles as they were: after some astonishment, he argues very justly, *can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost, as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*‖: that is, in pursuance of our Saviour's general direction.

But

* 1 Cor. x. 2. † John v. 43. ‡ Acts x. 48. § v. 44. ‖ v. 47, 48.

But though the expreſſion in the text undoubtedly implies this meaning, yet it comprehends a further one. For the phraſe tranſlated IN *the name*, is different from that in the paſſage relating to St. *Peter*, and ſignifies in ſtrictneſs, INTO *the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghoſt*, which word, *into*, the New Teſtament uſes nine times beſides*, in ſpeaking of baptiſm, whereas it uſes a word ſignifying, *in*, at moſt, but once beſides. The particular import of this term, I ſhall now explain to you.

It hath ever been uſual, that the believers or profeſſors of any doctrine ſhould be called by a name, derived from the firſt or chief teacher of that doctrine. And by whatever form or ceremony they declared themſelves his diſciples, by the ſame they were underſtood to take upon them his name. Thus the Jews, when, taking *Moſes* for their prophet and guide, they followed him into the midſt of the Red Sea, are ſaid by St. *Paul*, in alluſion to the water through which they paſſed, to have been *baptized into Moſes*†: which is equivalent to ſaying, that they were baptized into the name of *Moſes*. Not that in fact the Jews called themſelves by his name, as the ſeveral ſects of philoſophers did by the names, of their ſeveral leaders. For the doctrine, which *Moſes* taught, was not his own: and the obedience, which he required, was not to himſelf; but to God, the maker of heaven and earth. And therefore, when the Jews were thus baptized into *Moſes*, they were at the ſame time, in a much higher ſenſe, baptized into the name of God: taking that upon them, as an acknowledgement of their being his: for ſervants are known by the name of their Lord. In ſcripture therefore God himſelf ſtyles them, *my people, which are called by my name*‡. And they plead with him, *we are called by thy name, leave us not*§: and elſewhere declare, *all people will walk every one in the name of his god: and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever*‖. As then the Moabites were called by the name of their god, the people of *Chemoſh*¶; and the other idolatrous nations in like manner; ſo were the Iſraelites called by the true God. And whoever by

* Acts viii. 16. xix. 3, 5. Rom. vi. 3. 1 Cor. i. 13, 15. x. 2. xii. 13. Gal. iii. 27. † 1 Cor. x. 2. ‡ 2 Chr. vii. 14. § Jer. xiv. 9. In the Hebrew it is, *thy name is called over us.* ‖ Mic. iv. 5.
¶ Numb. xxi. 29. Jer. xlviii. 46.

by baptism, amongst other ceremonies, professed himself a convert to Judaism; he was, properly speaking, baptized into the same name.

When therefore the christian religion was published; as proselytes to the old dispensation had been baptized into *Moses*, taking him for their lawgiver and instructor: so believers in the new were baptized into Christ, receiving him for their Lord and Master. And as the former were in effect baptized into the name of the one true God, assuming the denomination of his servant: so the latter, being more fully instructed concerning the object of worship, were professedly and in form *baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost*: taking this name upon them, to believe in and obey for the future, as their badge of distinction from all other men. Whence our Saviour, in his prayer for his disciples, saith to the Father, *while I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me**. And in his exhortation to the angel of the church of *Pergamos*, he saith, *thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith*†.

It must be acknowledged indeed, that being baptized into the name of these three, is no where expressly mentioned, except in the text. But then the more usual phrase, of being baptized into Christ, or into his name, amounts to just the same thing. For by bearing the name of christians, we declare ourselves believers, not in Christ alone; but in the Father, *of whom*, to use the apostle's words, *the whole family in heaven and earth is named*‡; and in the Holy Spirit also: whose name appears evidently never to have been omitted in baptism, from that remarkable passage§, where some professors of the gospel owning that they were intirely ignorant concerning the Holy Ghost, St. *Paul* asks them, *unto what then were ye baptized?* And finding it was only *into the baptism of John*, commands them to be now baptized, *into the name of the Lord Jesus*‖. So it is expressed: but the foregoing question fully proves, that the name of the Holy Ghost was used likewise: from whence it follows, that the expression, *baptizing into the name of Christ*, wherever we find it in scripture, is only put for shortness: and

* John xvii. 11, 12. † Rev. ii. 13. ‡ Eph. iii. 15.
§ Acts xix. 1, 2, 3. ‖ v. 3, 4, 5.

and that the original form of baptiſm was, *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghoſt*: which accordingly was the conſtant one in the primitive church,

You ſee then, upon the whole, that as being *baptized into John's* baptiſm, was taking his name, and being called his diſciple: and as being *baptized into the name of Paul*, (a ſuppoſition, which he himſelf puts*) would have been ſetting him up as our chief leader and maſter: ſo when the ſcripture ſpeaks of being *baptized into the name of Chriſt*, the meaning is, that we avow believing and following him: and when, more fully, *into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghoſt*, it ſignifies, that we are received into the number of thoſe, who profeſs, and deſire to be known by the character of profeſſing, faith and duty towards the ever-bleſſed Trinity.

2. But wherein more particularly this faith, which is the foundation of duty, conſiſts; and what are the great articles of it, is the ſecond point, on which I propoſed to ſpeak: and theſe things not being explicitly taught in the form of baptiſm ſingly, muſt be learned from the reſt of ſcripture in conjunction with it, and profeſſed in proportion as they are learned. Now the ſcripture expreſsly aſſerts, in perfect conformity with reaſon, that there is but one God, the object of our faith and adoration: not one ſupreme, and other inferior ones, as the heathens believed, but one alone. *Hear, O Iſrael, the Lord our God is one Lord*†: *Thou ſhalt worſhip the Lord thy God, and him only ſhalt thou ſerve*‡. *I am the Lord, and there is none elſe, there is no God beſides me*§: *I am the Lord, that is my name, and my glory will I not give to another*‖, ſaith he himſelf. Accordingly St. Paul declares, that *to us* chriſtians, *there is one God the Father, of whom are all things*¶. But then, beſides the ſeveral orders of created beings, the ſame ſcripture as expreſsly mentions his eternal Son and Spirit: the one begotten of him, the other proceeding from him. The diſtinct and full meaning of theſe terms we know not: but this, however, they plainly denote, that the Son and Spirit are derived from the Father, in a manner, whatever it be, each different from the other,

* 1 Cor. i. 13. † Deut. vi. 4. ‡ Deut. vi. 13. Matth. iv. 4.
§ Iſ. xlv. 5. ‖ Iſ. xlii. 8. ¶ 1 Cor. viii. 6.

other, and both different from creation. Accordingly we find aſcribed to both theſe, not only the names, but the perfections of God, with honours and worſhip incommunicable to any creature: and while they are evidently diſtinguiſhed from the Father, they are as evidently deſcribed as being one with him. Wherein preciſely this union and this diſtinction lies, the ſcripture hath not ſaid, and therefore we cannot ſay, any farther than this: that the union appears to be, not only a ſimilitude of will, or of other powers and diſpoſitions, but the higheſt poſſible ſameneſs of eſſential attributes and properties; for which reaſon it hath been called an unity of eſſence, nature or ſubſtance: and the diſtinction appears to be, not only a difference of names, or of relations to created beings, but of ſubſiſtence and action, reſembling in ſome meaſure, as deſcribed in holy writ, that of different human agents: on which account it is ſaid to be a diſtinction of perſons. And from all theſe things put together, we conclude, that we are to believe and worſhip three perſons, who are one God.

Many other words and terms there are, beſides theſe, which have been uſed in ſpeaking of this great myſtery: ſome of them proper and uſeful, ſerving to expreſs only what the ſcripture expreſſes, and to guard it againſt miſrepreſentations; which therefore we ſhould ever interpret candidly and favourably: others, much better omitted; as indeed all are, that men employ to give any farther knowledge of the ſubject, than God hath given. For in ſuch caſes, but in this above any, the true method is, to receive, with the utmoſt humility and ſimplicity of mind, what is revealed: neither adding, nor diminiſhing, nor one way or other attempting to make it, either clearer, or darker, than it is. The former we cannot do: the latter we eaſily may, but ſurely ſhould not wiſh to do. Multiplying therefore phraſes and reaſonings, either to determine what the divine oracles have not determined, or to explain away what they have determined, is on both hands wrong; and hath often led very great men into unhappy errors, and very good men into fierce contentions: all which might be avoided, would they but be ſo modeſt, as neither to doubt of what the All-wiſe hath taught, nor pry into what he hath concealed; and ſo charitable, as never without the ſtrongeſt reaſon to think ill of others, and never for any reaſon do or wiſh ill to them.

There

There are certainly, in this wonderful doctrine, many things, concerning which, queſtions may be aſked, which we can only anſwer by confeſſing our ignorance: and ſome things, againſt which objections may be raiſed, that we can ſolve no otherwiſe, than by reminding thoſe, who make them, that ſuch difficulties muſt be expected, whenever a finite mind attempts to view an infinite object. But, though, in the Holy Trinity, there is much, that can by no means be comprehended fully; which is what we intend to ſay, by calling it *myſterious*, or above reaſon; (as indeed almoſt every thing is, in part, above ours:) yet, in what the ſcripture requires us to believe concerning the Holy Trinity, there is nothing, which either cannot be at all underſtood; or which, when underſtood, is abſurd and contrary to reaſon. Now whatever poſſibly may be true, we are bound, when a revelation, well atteſted, plainly teaches it, to believe actually is true. For faith in what God affirms, is unqueſtionably as neceſſary, as obedience to what he enjoins. And, little as we can ſee in matters of this high nature, we may notwithſtanding ſufficiently ſee very important motives for his injunction of faith in this doctrine: becauſe from the diſtinction of perſons in the Trinity, there ariſes a farther diſtinction of their relations to us, on which relations are founded diſtinct duties on our parts towards them; and very different from what they would be, if two of them were only creatures of exalted rank. The whole ſubſtance of chriſtianity is comprehended in conſidering, and accordingly honouring, (to expreſs it in the well-known words of our catechiſm) *God the Father*, as him, *who hath made us and all the world*; *God the Son*, as him, *who hath redeemed us and all mankind*: *God the Holy Ghoſt*, as him, *who ſanctifieth us and all the elect people of God*. Not but that each perſon concurs in each of theſe works: but ſtill, finding in ſcripture, that one is repreſented as more peculiarly and eminently concerned in one of them, and another in another; we juſtly diſtinguiſh the Father, Son, and Spirit, by the diſtinct offices of Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; and juſtly expreſs the diſtinction in our prayers and praiſes, as well as in our creed.

Thus, in the revelation of St. *John*, the ſaints above adore the perſon of the Father in the firſt of theſe characters. *And the four and twenty elders fell down before him that ſat on the*

*the throne, and worſhipped him that liveth for ever and ever,—ſaying, thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power: for thou haſt created all things; and for thy pleaſure they are, and were created**. We therefore on earth, in like manner ought to *worſhip, and fall down, and kneel before the Lord our Maker*†: to whom we farther owe peculiar thankſgivings on this account, that he according to the counſel of infinite wiſdom, was the original cauſe of our redemption. For *in this was manifeſted the love of God towards us, that he ſent his only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him*‡. *Bleſſed be the God and Father of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, which, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope*§. But the actual accompliſhment of this great deſign was the unſpeakably gracious work of the ſecond perſon, whom therefore we call our Redeemer, and addreſs with devotions appropriated to his office. This in the very next chapter of the ſame book of Revelation, we are told by St. *John*: *The four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, and ſung a new ſong, ſaying, thou art worthy—for thou waſt ſlain, and haſt redeemed us to God by thy blood, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.—And I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne,—ſaying with a loud voice, worthy is the Lamb that was ſlain, to receive power, and riches, and wiſdom, and ſtrength, and honour, and glory, and bleſſing. And every creature, which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, heard I, ſaying, bleſſing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him, that ſitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever*‖. In this univerſal acclamation of praiſe, our hearts ought to join with the humbleſt gratitude: to reverence him continually as the *Lord of all*¶; and in particular, beſides the holy ordinance of baptiſm, to celebrate with the devouteſt affection, that other ſolemn rite, which he hath inſtituted, commanding us, *this do in remembrance of me***. The diſtinct office of the third perſon, the Spirit, hath conſiſted from the beginning, firſt in revealing and confirming the truths of religion to men, from age to age, till the knowledge of them was completed in the New Teſtament; for *holy men of old ſpake as they were moved by the Holy*

* Rev. iv. 10, 11. † Pſ. xcv. 6. ‡ 1 John iv. 9. § 1 Pet. i. 3.
‖ Rev. v. 8, 9, 11, 12, 13. ¶ Acts x. 36. ** Luke xxii. 19.

*Ghoſt**: then in diſpoſing their minds, by the outward miniſtry of the word, and the inward workings of his grace, to receive and obey them: giving thoſe, who comply with his motions, ſtrength againſt temptation, comfort under affliction, fervency in prayer, growth in goodneſs, reviving hope, and ſometimes joyful aſſurance, of divine favour: All which operations tending wholly to improve us in piety and virtue, which together make up true ſanctity or holineſs, he is accordingly ſtyled the Sanctifier. And our duty to him plainly is, to be thankful to him for what he hath done, and pray for what he is ready to do, towards our ſalvation; never to *grieve*† *or do deſpite to him* by wilful ſin or negligence; but to learn from his inſtructions, and yield to his influences, that he may abide with us for ever, and make us, as the apoſtle expreſſes himſelf, *temples of the Holy Ghoſt*‡.

* 2 Pet. i. 21. † Eph. iv. 30. ‡ Heb. x. 29. § 1 Cor. vi. 19.

SER.

SERMON LXXXIV.

Our Saviour's Command to preach the Gospel to the World, and the Rational Manner of its Propagation.

MATTH. xxviii. 19, 20.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghoſt. Teaching them to obſerve all things, whatſoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

IN my former diſcourſe on theſe words I have ſhown both what is meant by being baptized *in*, or rather *into the name* of any one, particularly of *the Father, Son, and Holy Ghoſt*; and what faith in them that baptiſm obliges us to profeſs: endeavouring ſo to ſet forth our chriſtian belief, as neither to decide concerning what is hidden from us, nor to omit what is made known to us. For *the ſecret things belong unto the Lord our God: but thoſe things which are revealed, belong unto us and to our children for ever; that we may do all the words of this law* *. Let us now therefore go on to the practical part of chriſtianity, comprehended under the

Second branch of the text, in which our Saviour directs his apoſtles, what duties they are to enjoin men, in conſequence of their faith. *Teaching them to obſerve all things, whatſoever I have commanded you.*

Now of theſe, our duties to the ſeveral perſons of the Holy Trinity are ſo cloſely connected with our faith in them, that I thought it moſt natural to mention them together. And of the reſt, it would be impoſſible at preſent to ſpecify every one in particular. And therefore I ſhall only treat of the more general

* Deut. xxix. 29.

general heads and diviſions of them. By this commiſſion of our bleſſed Lord then, the miniſters of the goſpel are bound to teach, and the profeſſors of the goſpel to obſerve, the precepts of piety, as well as morality; of revealed religion, as well as natural; difficult, as well as eaſy duties; thoſe of ſelf-government, as well as of ſocial behaviour; *all things whatſoever he hath commanded*, and nothing elſe.

I. Precepts of piety, as well as morality. In ſome ages of the world the generality of perſons, and in all too many, have almoſt entirely diſregarded virtue, at leaſt ſome parts of it, while yet they ſeemed very zealous in religion. That the *religion* of ſuch *is vain* *, requires little proof. Indeed it muſt be, either mere pretence, or groſs miſtake. Either they have really none of that devotion, which they profeſs, or it is devotion to an † *unknown God*. For did they at all apprehend his nature aright; the love of him could not but incline them to the love of whatever was good; and the fear of him could not but deter them from whatever was evil. Theſe things are ſo eaſily demonſtrable, and the miſchiefs of not attending to them have been ſo dreadful; that wherever knowledge and liberty have prevailed, ſuch wrong notions of duty to our Maker have (amongſt the more conſiderable part of the world at leaſt) quickly fallen into the contempt and hatred, which they well deſerve. But then, as it is natural for the warmth of men to carry them too far; and the thoughtleſſneſs of men to confound matters, which ſhould be diſtinguiſhed: ſo, in our times, moſt unhappily, multitudes have run from one extreme to another, and, not diſcerning the difference between two of the unlikeſt things in the world, when well compared, falſe religion and true, have, in a great meaſure, if not abſolutely, rejected both together. Declaring in general the higheſt honour for virtue, they ſlight and even ridicule piety: the inward feeling of it, under the name of enthuſiaſm; the outward marks of it, under that of ſuperſtition. Yet plainly, if ſentiments of duty and affection to our fellow creatures be neceſſary ingredients in a good character: want of them towards our Creator, muſt (where means of inſtruction are afforded) be a certain argument of a bad one. And, if our regards to our fellow-creatures ought to be ſhown by viſible tokens, not only that they may

* James i. 26. † Acts xvii. 23.

may be ſenſible of our proper diſpoſitions, but that by exerciſing them we may improve in them, and others be excited to imitation: then our reverence to our Creator ought likewiſe to be manifeſted openly; becauſe, though he ſees the devout thoughts, that lie hid in our hearts, yet, by expreſſing them, we ſhall both ſtrengthen them in ourſelves, and ſet an uſeful example to thoſe around us. Indeed the connection of religious duties with moral is ſo very cloſe, that, as the religion of thoſe is always falſe, who think meanly of virtue: ſo the virtue of thoſe is never uniformly, if at all, true, who think meanly of religion. For the belief of a God, who obſerves and will recompenſe, being in all caſes the greateſt, and in ſome the only, ſupport of right conduct: they, who either diſbelieve or diſregard him, muſt frequently fall into wrong conduct, amidſt the various temptations of life. And the truth is, the generality of thoſe amongſt them, who talk the moſt of virtue, appear to concern themſelves very little farther about it, than to oppoſe it, in their talk, to religion. Such indeed cannot be really, in any degree, ſerious. But many who, in ſome reſpects, are ſuch, and imagine they are in all, would aſſuredly find, on a careful examination, that they are dangerouſly deficient in this reſpect: and that cultivating and exerting dutiful affection to the author of their being, is not only in itſelf *the firſt and great commandment*, but hath a moſt powerful influence on the practice of that *ſecond*, which *is like unto it* *, and of every other human obligation.

II. We are bound to obſerve the precepts of revealed religion, as well as natural. That God can make known to us many truths, of which we were ignorant, though greatly intereſted in them, will not ſurely be doubted: for we can make known ſuch very often one to another. And that from theſe truths correſponding rules of behaviour may flow, is equally plain. Thoſe relations and duties therefore to our Redeemer and to our Sanctifier, which the holy ſcripture alone diſcovers to us, are not, on that account, at all the leſs real, than thoſe to our Creator, of which reaſon informs us. Further: as God is the ſovereign of the world, there is no more room for queſtion, whether, under the general laws of his moral kingdom, he may not eſtabliſh, from time to time, particular and different inſtitutions

* Matth. xxii. 37. *&c.*

inſtitutions and forms of religion; than whether, under the general laws of human ſociety, earthly ſovereigns may not eſtabliſh particular and different inſtitutions and forms of government. And laſtly: as God knows perfectly well, both the nature of our circumſtances, and the proper method of treating us; that he may poſſibly have very important motives for ſome of his appointments, of which motives we can diſcern ſcarce any thing, is much more certain, than that a wiſe man, well acquainted with any affair, may perceive many ſteps to be fitting in relation to it, which a weak man, uninſtructed in it, doth not.

Whatever precepts then are contained in revelation, ſince none of them, rightly underſtood, are contrary to reaſon, it is our indiſpenſable duty to obſerve them, though ever ſo implicitly, *walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameleſs* *. We know not what we do, when we reject or ſlight any one of them: only this we know, that we diſobey that authority, which enjoins the whole: a conſideration, worthy of being laid ſeriouſly to heart by all thoſe, (for too many there are,) who, either preſumptuouſly, or thoughtleſsly, neglect or depreciate ſome of the inſtitutions of chriſtianity, while they profeſs to reverence others; and, as any ſhadow of argument, or groundleſs imagination leads them, determine with themſelves, that this they will do, that they will not; this they will look on as a matter of moment, that as a trifle. It cannot be, that any of the laws of Chriſt, our Lord and Maſter, are to be treated thus. And yet ſome of them are treated thus by ſuch numbers, (who, notwithſtanding call themſelves by his name,) that they muſt be mentioned in particular.

The ſacrament of baptiſm, the leading part of our Saviour's commiſſion in the text, is not indeed thrown off, but frequently attended with ſcarce common ſerioufneſs. The obligation of parents and maſters to *bring up* thoſe under their care *in the nurture and admonition of the Lord* †, is both cruelly and unwiſely forgotten. The apoſtolical and very uſeful ordinance of confirmation, is too often omitted, and ſtill oftener conſidered as an empty form: private devotion practiſed, it may be feared, by very few, at leaſt with any attention: pious reading and meditation by fewer ſtill: family prayer almoſt entirely laid

* Luke i. 6. † Eph. vi. 4.

laid aſide: and the public ſervice of God, by ſome avowedly ſcorned, by others, both thought and ſpoken of with a contemptuous indifference; as if it might well be left to fancy and chance, when and how often, or whether almoſt at all, they ſhould condeſcend to join in that worſhip of him who made them, which himſelf hath preſcribed. The day, which he hath directed to be kept holy, is lamentably, and in many places openly, profaned, not only by the omiſſion juſt mentioned, but by needleſs worldly buſineſs, improper diverſions, and what is yet worſe, intemperance and debauchery. Nay, the far greater part, even of ſuch, as obſerve other inſtitutions with no ſmall appearance of conſcientiouſneſs, aſtoniſhingly overlook, in ſpite of continual admonitions, their Saviour's injunction of commemorating, at the holy table, his dying love, delivered nearly with his dying breath. Experience hath proved to a ſhocking degree, that in proportion as diſregard to duties, peculiarly chriſtian, increaſes, diſregard to all duty increaſes too: and what the end of it will be (unleſs through God's grace our timely reformation put a happy end to it) I know not how we can better judge, than by our bleſſed Lord's own words, which he hath verified ſo dreadfully on thoſe once ſhining lights, the churches of *Aſia*, to whom they were primarily directed. *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the firſt works: elſe I will come unto thee quickly, and remove thy candleſtick out of its place, except thou repent* *.

III. Being bound to whatever Chriſt hath commanded us, we are bound to perform the moſt laborious and unwelcome, as well as the eaſieſt, of his commands. We may be ſure, he hath enjoined us nothing, but what he will make poſſible, nothing but what he hath a right, nothing but what he hath cauſe, to enjoin. And therefore, the difficulty of his precepts can never be an excuſe for not obeying them. Sometimes this difficulty is but imaginary: and what we apprehend that we cannot do at all, would we but try in a proper manner, we ſhould do with great eaſe. Sometimes it is real indeed, but of our own creating. Slight inclinations have grown, by indulgence or negligence, into ſettled habits: wilful wrong conduct hath put obſtacles in the way of acting right: and then we think it very grievous, that we muſt be at pains to bring ourſelves

* Rev. ii. 5.

ſelves out of a condition, that we needed never have brought ourſelves into. Or, ſuppoſing any virtue originally hard to practiſe, do we not often obey extremely hard injunctions of men? And why not therefore thoſe of God? Be the labour ever ſo great; ſtill, both in the nature of the thing, and by the appointment of heaven, no one can become happy, that doth not become good: and no one is truly good, who purpoſely or negligently lives in the omiſſion of any duty, or commiſſion of any ſin. Difficulty is a reaſon for nothing, but exerting ourſelves, and applying to God for help: which whoever doth in earneſt, will find oppoſition ſerve only to ſtrengthen his chriſtian graces by exerciſe here, and augment the reward of them for ever hereafter.

IV. We muſt obſerve thoſe commands, which relate to the government of ourſelves, no leſs than thoſe which reſpect our fellow-creatures. Men are ſtrangely apt to run into extremes in this particular. Some, on the merit of their abſtinence from unlawful pleaſures, venture without ſcruple to be ill-humoured, hard-hearted, cenſorious, and unjuſt; while ſome again place the whole of a right character in a gay kind of good nature: and, either hurting, as they pretend, nobody but themſelves; or, however doing others only ſuch injuries, as they imagine matter of merriment; go almoſt whatever lengths of ſenſual gratification their deſires prompt them to. Now theſe latter, far from being the harmleſs people, which they would have the world think them, uſually contribute more, by the unavoidable, and often foreſeen, conſequences of their vices, and the contagion of their examples, to bring miſery into private life, and diſtreſs, if not ruin, upon the public, than almoſt any wicked perſons, that can be mentioned beſides. But were they, in theſe reſpects, ever ſo innocent: yet our being rational creatures, as indiſpenſably binds us to ſobriety, chaſtity, and decency, as our being ſocial creatures doth to inoffenſiveneſs and beneficence. A mind immerſed in voluptuouſneſs, nay filled with amuſements and trifles, and attentive to them only or chiefly, is by no means in a moral ſtate, and much leſs in a religious one. Our evident capacity and formation for higher and better things, cannot but carry with it a proportionable obligation, to the improvement of our underſtandings in the knowledge of truth, and of our hearts in the eſteem of virtue;

to

to the care of acting worthily and usefully amongst our fellow-creatures, and qualifying ourselves for spiritual happiness with our Creator. Thus much even the light of nature will teach us. And if revelation be consulted; there we shall find the strongest cautions, against that fondness for sumptuous living, delicacy, and splendor, which brought the rich man into the place of torment *; against being *lovers of pleasures, more than lovers of God* †. Scriptures, like these, are not designed to drive persons into unnatural rigours and austerities: but they are designed to restrain them from that habit and study of self-indulgence, which being attended perhaps with the commission of no flagrant sins, looks to be an allowable way of consuming time: but indeed brings poor wretches, often by quick degrees, to intire forgetfulness of God and themselves, and extinguishes all attention to what deserves it most. This lethargy of the mind is the great danger of a state of prosperity and affluence: which therefore, as many as are placed in that state, should continually watch against, as being totally contrary to a spirit of religion; and remember, that whoever so *liveth in pleasure*, as to live to it, *is dead while he liveth* ‡: dead to all the purposes of christianity here, and all the hopes of felicity hereafter.

V. Our Saviour's direction, that all nations be *taught to observe* every thing *which he hath commanded*, implies a prohibition of teaching any thing in his name, which he hath not commanded, either personally while on earth, or by the Holy Spirit of truth after his ascension. For where his commission ends, there the powers of those, to whom he gave it, end also. Still, in matters left undetermined, or not fully determined by him, men of knowledge may signify their opinion, men of prudence may suggest their advice, and both are to be regarded in a proper degree. Superiors may likewise interpose their authority, so far as public order and peace require; and, in all things lawful, others are bound to submit to them. But no man, or number of men, may presume to set up their own judgment, or their own will, for a law of Christ: or add a single article, as a necessary one, to that rule of *faith* and practice, which was *once delivered unto the saints* §. Even St. *Paul* himself

* Luke xvi. 19, *&c.* † 2 Tim. iii. 4. ‡ 1 Tim. v. 6.
§ Jude v. 3.

hath on one occaſion accurately diſtinguiſhed between what he, and what the Lord in perſon ſpoke * ; between points in which he *had* an expreſs *commandment*, and points in which he *gave his judgment, as one that had obtained mercy to be faithful* †: that is, in the truſt of the apoſtleſhip. And if ſuch a perſon was thus careful, much more ought the miniſters of religion in theſe later ages, who can have no certain acquaintance with it, but from his writings and the reſt of ſcripture, be ſolicitous not to *preach any other goſpel, than that they have received* ‡ ; nor *build on the foundation of Jeſus Chriſt*, ſuperſtructures that will not abide the trial §, *teaching for doctrines the commandments of men* ¶. They, who aſſume this power, uſurp a dominion over their fellow-ſervants, to which only their maſter in heaven hath a right: and they who obey this power, ſo far *worſhip God in vain, who hath never required this at their hands* ‖.

I have now gone through the ſecond part of the text: the duties, which the apoſtles and their ſucceſſors were to enjoin. And therefore I proceed to ſet before you,

III. The protection and happineſs, of which both they who faithfully preach the goſpel, and they who ſincerely embrace it, may be aſſured. *Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.*

Amongſt men, chuſing to be with any one is not only a natural conſequence of having a regard for him, but, on many important occaſions, a neceſſary means of ſhowing that regard to his advantage. In condeſcenſion therefore to common language, God, though preſent every where, is deſcribed in holy writ as peculiarly drawing nigh unto, being, and dwelling with, thoſe, who, by a temper and conduct of piety and virtue intitle themſelves to his love and fatherly care: whereas he is repreſented as departing from perſons of a contrary character, not vouchſafing to look upon them, or beholding them afar off, till he returns to execute judgment on them. Of this kind is the manner of ſpeech uſed in the text: where our bleſſed Lord, being about to leave the world, and go unto the Father, tells his followers, that though his viſible and bodily preſence was to be withdrawn very ſoon, he ſhould be ſtill as really preſent upon

* Gal. i. 9. † 1 Cor. vii. 10, 12. ‡ 1 Cor. iii. 11, 12, 13.
§ v. 25. ¶ Matth. xv. 9. ‖ IC. i. 22.

upon earth, as ever: not only ſeeing, but watching, directing, and defending them continually. And therefore, notwithſtanding St. *Matthew* thought fit to abſtain from ſubjoining in his goſpel any words of his own to theſe moſt ſolemn ones of our Saviour, yet his aſcent into heaven is almoſt as well underſtood by them, as if it had been expreſsly related.

This gracious promiſe was doubtleſs immediately, and in the firſt place, made to the apoſtles. But as the uſe, for which it was made, is perpetual; and the term, for which it its expreſſed to be made, cannot poſſibly be confined to themſelves; but muſt ſignify either, as we tranſlate it, *to the end of the world*, or *to the end of the goſpel age*, which is to laſt as long as the world; it muſt neceſſarily be extended to thoſe, who ſhould at any time ſucceed the apoſtles in teaching the faith and duties of chriſtianity. And ſince the preſence of Chriſt with the teachers of his religion is deſigned for the benefit of thoſe, who are taught it: therefore all ſuch, in all ages, have a ſhare in the aſſurance of the text. Accordingly, in many places of ſcripture, the preſence, not only of the Son of God, but of the Father and Holy Spirit, is promiſed to every true believer without exception, St *Paul* declares, *if any man have not the Spirit of Chriſt, he is none of his* *. *And Chriſt himſelf declares, if a man love me,—my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him* †.

If then, as the church of *Rome* pretends, ſuch expreſſions as theſe convey a promiſe of infallibility, or ſecurity of not departing from the right faith, to their church, or any perſon or perſons in it; they convey the ſame to every church, and every perſon in it. But our Saviour's declaration is, not that any one or more churches may not, if they will, intirely throw off the faith; and even all churches, as well as all men, fall both into many errors and many ſins: but that this ſhall never happen through his forſaking them, but their forſaking him: and that, how great ſoever the apoſtacy of the latter times may be, (as St. *Paul* hath foretold it ſhould be a very grievous one ‡;) how much ſoever at any time the church of Chriſt may be obſcured, it ſhall never be extinguiſhed: for it muſt continue to the end of the world, ſince he hath promiſed to *be with it* to the end of the world. In different ages he is preſent to it in diffe-

* Rom. viii. 9. † John xiv. 23. ‡ Tim. iv. 1

reat manners, as the circumſtances of each require. His apoſtles he directed by inſpiration into all truth: and ſtrengthened them with power to work miracles in confirmation of it. When religion, by their means, was known and proved ſufficiently, theſe extraordinary effects of his preſence gradually ceaſed: but thoſe, which remained ſtill needful, were ſtill experienced. And to this day, wherever his miniſters teach men to believe and do what he hath commanded, there *he is always with them*: and *wherever two or three* of his diſciples *are gathered together in his name, there he is in the midſt of them**: protecting his whole church, and every member of it, outwardly againſt their temporal enemies to ſuch a degree, as infinite wiſdom ſees to be fit; and inwardly againſt their ſpiritual ones, ſo that nothing, but their own wilful ſins and perſeverance in them, ſhall hazard the ſalvation of any one of them. But ſo far as men allow themſelves to teach, believe, or practiſe contrary to his commands, they forfeit their title to his gracious preſence, which evidently depends on their obedience to thoſe commands. And conſequently no ſet of men in the world have a right to argue, as the *Romaniſts* would fain do: that Chriſt hath promiſed to be with his church for ever; and therefore their church, or the majority of the whole church, can teach only what he appointed they ſhould. But ours is a very juſt way of arguing; that we teach what Chriſt appointed we ſhould, and therefore we are a part of his church, with which he hath promiſed to be for ever. For that our doctrines are catholic, however the *Romaniſts* have ſtolen the name, we are bold to ſay, and fully able to prove: on this account we have nothing to fear. Could we but ſay as much of our lives too, then all were well.

But alas, though they have little cauſe on compariſon to reproach us in this reſpect, we have much cauſe to reproach ourſelves. The number of profeſſed chriſtians amongſt us indeed is large: yet even that is leſſening. But the number of ſuch as are truly chriſtians, and behave like chriſtians—What ſhall we ſay of this? May God, *who commanded the light to ſhine out of darkneſs*, cauſe the light of his goſpel to *ſhine* more effectually *into the hearts of men*†, and brighten the very dark proſpect there is before us concerning ſpiritual matters; that we may *know, at leaſt in this*

* Matth. xviii. 20. † 2 Cor. iv. 6.

this our day, the things which belong to our peace *, our present and future happiness. But what others will do, is for them to consider: and what shall be the consequences of mens doings, is for God to appoint. Let us only look to our own souls; that in the midst of a bad world we be, as we ought, innocent, prudent, and exemplary; that we watch over those, who are under our care, and warn others as we have opportunity; that, by openly professing the gospel of Christ, we encourage the profession of it; and, by adorning our profession with a suitable conduct, do honour to it. Provided we behave thus; let others behave as they please, and the event be what it will to them, and to all, in temporal concerns; to us the final event however shall be good. Christianity began with a very small number: and were it to be reduced to an equally small one again, we might take the same comfort still, which our Saviour gave his disciples at first: *Fear not, little flock: for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom* †. *The kingdoms of this earth* we have cause to hope will yet, in due time, notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, *become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ* ‡, in a much ampler manner than they have hitherto been. But the kingdom of heaven, *God, who cannot lie* §, hath, in the plainest terms, promised to the faithful disciples of his Son. And all who have secured his presence with them here, by a life of religion and virtue, shall assuredly reign with him for ever hereafter in those blessed *mansions of his Father's house*, whither *he is gone to prepare a place for us, and will come again, and receive us unto himself, that where he is, there we may be also* ¶.

* Rev. xi. 15. † Luke xix. 42. ‡ Tit. i. 2.
§ Luke xii. 32. ¶ John xiv. 2, 3.

SER.

SERMON LXXXV.

On the Cruelty of Tyrants, and their Striking Counter-action by Providence.

MATTH. ii. 16.

Then Herod, when he saw, that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth; and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under; according to the time, which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.

THE piteous history contained in these words, is the sequel of that, immediately preceding, which informs us, that, on the birth of our Saviour in *Judea*, some Gentiles of learning and distinction came from the east to *Jerusalem*, by divine direction, to pay him homage: on which, *Herod* the king, understanding that the *Messiah* was to be born at *Bethlehem*, sent them thither to find him; with a charge to bring him notice of the place where the child was, that he also might do him the same honour; designing really to destroy him, instead of paying him respect: but that, *being warned of God, not to return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way**.

The sad consequences which followed their departure, are mentioned in the words of the text; and present to us a transaction of so remarkable a nature as well deserves a particular examination into it, and an explanation of the several circumstances attending it. This is what I mean to give you in the following discourse: and if, in doing it, I should be led to spend more time, in proportion, than usual, on points not immediately

* Ver. 12.

mediately belonging to the great articles of chriſtian faith or practice; you will remember, that we ought to underſtand, not only the doctrines and precepts, but the hiſtory of the goſpel: eſpecially as in the preſent unbelieving age, objections are too frequently made againſt the ſeveral parts of it, in their turns; and as a due conſideration of every part, will not only confirm us in the truth of it, but furniſh abundantly more matter of pious and moral reflection, than at the firſt view it may ſeem to afford.

The text begins with acquainting us, that *Herod, when he ſaw that he was mocked of the wiſe men, was exceeding wroth.* Not that they had any deſign of provoking him, or expoſing him to contempt. That is not the behaviour of good perſons to the very worſt. He had commanded them indeed to *bring him word again*, where the child was: but probably had too haughtily preſumed on their compliance, though not his ſubjects, to think of aſking a promiſe of them. Or, had they made one, as they naturally enough might, with a full purpoſe of keeping it; the warning, received from God, muſt intirely have ſuperſeded that obligation: of which, other things alſo might have hindred the performance. But unreaſonable and vehement ſpirits hardly ever ſtay to inquire into ſuch matters: whatever diſappoints them, appears to them an indignity. And accordingly *Herod* was not only ſorry, that his intention was fruſtrated, but *exceeding wroth*: imagined it no ſin at all to contrive the murder of the harmleſs child whoſe birth had been notified to him; but an intolerable offence, that the wiſe men ſhould, whatever their reaſon was, fail to be made his inſtruments for accompliſhing it.

And now, his wickedneſs increaſing as his rage boiled within him, rather than miſs of committing the one crime, which alone he deſigned at firſt, he reſolves to commit he knows not how many more of the like ſort, without any other pretext for them: imagining that the object of his apprehenſions continued ſtill in the ſame place. On that imagination ſolely, either having firſt inquired after him in vain, (for he was removed by the direction of God) or conceiving, that no certain information would be obtained by a perſon ſo abhorred as he knew himſelf to be, and that taking time for a ſearch was giving time for an eſcape; he forms the ſhocking reſolution of killing

killing all the children of *Bethlehem*, and its territory; unmoved by conſcience, or compaſſion, or fear of revenge, or the deteſtation of mankind, in order to make ſure of killing that child, from which, of all others, he ought to have abſtained, the long-expected *hope of Iſrael*[*], the great promiſed bleſſing to that religion, which he himſelf profeſſed. This direful purpoſe he orders to be put in immediate execution: too many find their intereſt in obeying his will: no one hath power, or courage, to reſiſt it: the deed is done: the poor infants miſerably ſlain.

No wonder, that *then*, as St. *Matthew* obſerves, *was fulfilled*, that is, verified anew, more eminently and literally, *what was ſpoken* originally on a different occaſion, *by Jeremy the prophet, ſaying: In Rama*, a town of *Benjamin*, adjoining to *Bethlehem* of *Judah*, which tribes were therefore probably mixed here, as well as at *Jeruſalem* and other places; *in Rama, a voice was heard, lamentation and weeping and great mourning: Rachel*, the mother of *Benjamin*, *weeping*, that is, in the perſons of her female deſcendants, *for her children; and would not be comforted, becauſe they are not*: are not any longer in this world, for a comfort and joy to their friends; but taken away, to their inexpreſſible affliction, by a ſtroke of violence, the moſt unexpected, the moſt afflicting and deſolating, the moſt exquiſitely painful and inſupportable, that can be conceived.

Some perhaps may be tempted almoſt to doubt, whether a human creature be capable of ſuch barbarity. But, alas, we cannot tell, to what degree our own diſpoſitions might be depraved, were we to give ourſelves up to iniquity, and provoke a juſt God to withdraw his grace from us. Much leſs can we be ſure what amazing abominations others may come to harbour within their breaſts. *The heart* of man *is deceitful above all things, and deſperately wicked: who can know it*[†]? But eſpecially the hearts of tyrants, grown old in the poſſeſſion and exerciſe of abſolute power, accuſtomed by flattery and pride to think themſelves of a higher ſpecies than the reſt of mankind, hardened to executions and ſlaughter by long uſe, become ſuſpicious of every perſon and thing, by experience of the falſehood of others, and conſciouſneſs of their own; and habituated

to

[*] Acts xxviii. 20. [†] Jer. xvii. 9.

to hate their ſubjects, as knowing that they are hated by them. Now ſuch, if ever man was, *Herod* was. His whole hiſtory, written not by a chriſtian, but a Jew, fully proves, that no degree of cruelty was improbable concerning one of a nature ſo ſavage: who, beſides the fierce wars, in which his boundleſs ambition engaged him, was committing murders in cold blood throughout his life; of his neareſt relations amongſt others, even his own children; every one of them from motives of ſtate-jealouſy, the very inducement that prompted him to the inhumanity charged on him in the text: and was ſo far from relenting at the approach of death, which commonly inſpires leſs hardened ſinners with penitence and mildneſs, that he cauſed a large number of his principal ſubjects to be aſſembled; and putting them under confinement, bound thoſe about him by an oath, to maſſacre them all, as ſoon as he ſhould expire; that the nation might mourn for his deceaſe on that account, which on all others, he knew, would rejoice*. It is in vain to ſay of ſuch a one, that he ſhewed on many occaſions a great concern for his reputation: and therefore was not likely to commit ſo monſtrous a murder, as that of theſe children. He did ſo, when he could gratify his vanity, without prejudicing his imaginary intereſts: but never elſe. And therefore his proceeding without mercy in this caſe, far from being incredible, is only an evidence, that the expectations of the Meſſiah's coming at that time were great and general; and his own apprehenſions of it inexpreſſibly ſtrong.

But ſtill it may be wondered, if *Herod* was guilty of ſo execrable a deed, that no ancient hiſtorian ſhould record it, and paint it in its due colours, as they have done many things, which deſerved it leſs: but ſhould all, excepting St. *Matthew*, omit the mention of it†. Now, in truth, there is no ancient heathen hiſtorian of thoſe times extant, beſides *Suetonius*: whoſe work is only a brief account of the lives of the twelve *Cæſars*; in which a narrative of this kind is by no means to be expected. And, were all the hiſtorians of that age remaining, *Judea* lay at the extremity of the *Roman* empire, nor was, in *Herod*'s

* Joſeph. Ant. l. xvii. c. 6. §. 5. Bell. Jud. l. i. c. 33. §. 6.

† *Joſeph Scaliger* is ſaid to have denied the genuineneſs of this part of St. *Matthew*. *Anſaldi* hath defended it, in a book, intitled, *Herodiani Infanticidii vindiciæ*, 4o. Brixiæ, 1747.

reign, a province of it, properly ſpeaking: the ſmaller interval affairs therefore of ſuch a petty diſtrict, would be little regarded, amidſt ſo many of greater importance. And, though the murder of a number of innocent babes excites in us, with the utmoſt reaſon, the ſtrongeſt pity and horror; yet, alas, the caſe was far otherwiſe during the days of pagan darkneſs; when, in the moſt civilized nations, parents deſtroyed, or expoſed to deſtruction, their own children, at pleaſure, how ſtrange ſoever it may ſeem, without ſcruple and without puniſhment.

But further, it doth not appear, that any other old authors ever did write the life of *Herod*, or the hiſtory of his reign, than *Nicolas of Damaſcus*, and *Joſephus*. Now the work of the former is loſt. And he was not only a courtier and domeſtic friend of *Herod*, but was employed as embaſſador to *Auguſtus*, to defend him in his life-time, and his character after his death, from imputations of tyrrany and cruelty, brought before that emperor by the Jewiſh nation *. This man therefore neither would be inclined to relate ſuch things of him in his book; nor could do it indeed, without condemning himſelf for having been his apologiſt. Beſides, he was ſo ſhamefully partial to him, as to deduce his genealogy from a noble *Hebrew* family; though it was notorious, that his father was an *Edomite* †.

As for *Joſephus*: he wrote at the diſtance of above 90 years after the fact: which we are apt to conſider, as taking away many more lives, than probably it did. *Bethlehem* was not a large place: whether its territory was, we know not. The order given could be only againſt the male children. *Herod*, we are told, ſlew all theſe, under a certain age: that is, all whom the meſſengers of his bloody purpoſe found. But poſſibly, going on ſo ſhocking an errand, they might not be deſirous of executing their orders with the utmoſt ſecrecy and ſtrictneſs. Or, if they were; the alarm, once taken, would quickly ſpread; and a conſiderable proportion undoubtedly be carried away, or concealed. The fabulous legends tell us indeed of vaſt multitudes killed: but alledge no ſufficient proof of

* Joſeph. Ant. l. xvi. c. 9. §. 1. & c. 10. §. 8. & l. xvii. c. 5. §. 2. & c. 11. §. 2. & Fr. l. Jud. l. ii. c. 6. §. 2. † Joſeph. Ant. l. xiv. c. 1. 3

of their aſſertions*. And the wiſer authors, even of the popiſh communion, diſregard and ridicule them. Now, ſuppoſing the number of the ſlaughtered infants to be ſmall; the memory of what a few villagers had ſuffered, might eaſily, when printing was unknown, and writing not near ſo common as now, be, in much leſs time than 90 years, quite buried under the ſtories of the many large executions, which the tyrant had made, of perſons more noted. Or it might be induſtriouſly ſtifled by the unbelieving Jews, to prevent it from being of ſervice to the cauſe of chriſtianity. Or indeed it might be utterly overwhelmed by the deſtruction of their country, with the ſlaughter of millions, which had happened before *Joſephus* began to compile materials for his book. It is therefore extremely poſſible, that this maſſacre, though perfectly true, might never come to his ears: or, if it did, yet not with any certainty. And, if his information about it ſeemed to him rather doubtful, he did wiſely in paſſing it over.

But ſuppoſing him ever ſo ſure of it; he might think proper only to involve it covertly in a general account of the butcheries of *Herod* about this time; occaſioned, as he ſaith, which is exceedingly remarkable, by the expectation of a new king†. For he might be unwilling, or even afraid, to offend the poſterity of that monarch, with one of whom, *Agrippa*, he was intimate, by the expreſs relation of a barbarity ſo unmanly: and might think, that he had ſufficiently given his readers to underſtand *Herod*'s character, without ſaying more‡. If the teſtimony concerning our Saviour aſcribed to him, be genuine; his omitting to name theſe children will be an objection of ſmall

* *Jerom* ſaith, *Herodes, Scriba & Phariſæi, pro uno infante multa parvulorum millia trucidarunt.* Com. in Iſ. l. 3. c. 7. vol 4. p. 112, Ed. Veron. But he lived about 400 years after the time. And as he aſſerts what the leaſt reflection would have ſhewn him was falſe, that the Scribes and Phariſees were guilty of this fact, he deſerves no credit in what lay more out of his knowledge.

† Ant. l. xvii. c. 2. § 4.

‡ *Joſephus*, in his own life, § 65. ſaith, "It is neceſſary, that a "hiſtorian ſhould write truth: but he may allowably avoid charging on "ſome perſons their ill actions with bitterneſs; not for their ſakes, "but for that of his own moderation." But he ſaith this, not in relation to *Herod*, but to excuſe himſelf for not having expoſtulated till then with *Juſtus*, on the falſehoods contained in his hiſtory of the Jewiſh war, publiſhed before that of *Joſephus*.

ſmall weight againſt the goſpel hiſtory. And if that teſtimony be not genuine; it will be no wonder in the leaſt, that he, who for the ſake of paying court to *Veſpaſian*, as the foretold *Meſſiah*, could ſuppreſs the mention of *Jeſus*, and his miracles, ſhould avoid to record a fact, which muſt have brought the ſame *Jeſus* in view, under that character; and *Bethelem*, as the place where the Meſſiah ſhould be born*. He hath been ſilent, in other parts of his work, for much leſs reaſons, about many conſiderable things, of which he muſt have known the truth†. Indeed it is ſo frequent in all hiſtories for one author to paſs over things, even of great conſequence, which another relates, that, if this were to be made a ground of ſuſpicion concerning the articles thus omitted; ſcarce any author could preſerve his credit, and certainly not *Joſephus*: for in very much of what he delivers, he ſtands entirely ſingle, and unſupported. Another material conſideration is, that as he wrote long after St. *Matthew*, whoſe goſpel muſt have been well known in *Judea*, he might, and ſurely would, have contradicted him in this point, if he could: which he hath not.

It may be added further, that *Macrobius* a *Roman* writer, who lived indeed a conſiderable time after both of them, in the beginning of the fifth century, but ſaith he compiled his performance out of earlier books; and who, by putting *Syria* inſtead of *Bethlehem*, ſhews, he did not borrow this part from the New Teſtament; and who, being a heathen, was not partial to the goſpel hiſtory; mentions *Herod*'s murder of the children, as a known truth‡. And his joining another fact with it, which poſſibly happened at a month's diſtance from it, is by no means enough to diſcredit his teſtimony: which will be greatly confirmed, if we believe *Sixtus Senenſis*, a learned man, who lived two centuries ago, and ſaith he read the ſame account with that of *Macrobius*, in a part, now loſt, of *Dio Caſſius*, a Pagan hiſtorian, 100 years older than *Macrobius*§.

A book

* Perhaps for a like reaſon *Juſtus* never mentioned the chriſtians, though they made no contemptible figure than in *Paleſtine*.

† See Ottii Spicileg. in Joſeph.

‡ See, concerning theſe particulars, Maſſon's appendix to Biſhop Chandler's vindication.

§ See Dr. Gregory Sharp's argument in defence of chriſtianity, p. 41.

A book alſo, of uncertain date, written in *Hebrew* by a moſt virulent Jew, admits *Herod* to have done this deed*.

But whatever may be ſaid concerning the omiſſion of it by others, you may wonder, that all the Evangeliſts, excepting St. *Matthew*, ſhould omit it. For they all relate the ſame matters, in ſeveral inſtances of leſs moment: but then theſe were chiefly, if not ſolely, matters which came to paſs after our Saviour's public teaching began, and at which they were preſent. St. *Luke* and St. *John* have each of them many particulars, and even St. *Mark* hath ſome, which none of the reſt have. And plainly no one of them undertook to publiſh a complete hiſtory of our Saviour's life: but each wrote thoſe occurrences, which he knew or remembered beſt, or judged the moſt needful to be inſerted in his narrative. What the beloved diſciple ſaith of his own goſpel, may be extended to each of the former. *Many other things Jeſus did*, (and doubtleſs other perſons did in relation to him) *which are not written in this book: but theſe are written, that ye may believe*†. The fact now before us was not the moſt neceſſary to be known. Had St. *Matthew* likewiſe been ſilent about it, our faith would ſtill have had abundantly ſufficient evidence. But when he had related it, there was leſs need, that the goſpels, which came after, ſhould. And perhaps the greater wonder is, that ſo many ſuch things are repeated in them, than that ſo few are.

But hence ariſes one very natural and important obſervation more: that St. *Matthew* could have no temptation to forge a ſtory, which was no way eſſential to his deſign, and might have been ſo eaſily diſproved when he wrote, if it was not true: eſpecially, as he is underſtood to have written in *Judea*. Or, if he had been ſo raſh, the early writers againſt chriſtianity would have charged him with it, and the early writers for it endeavoured to defend him: and there is not the leaſt appearance of either.

Still one circumſtance may ſeem attended with a difficulty. Why ſhould *Herod* carry his cruelty ſo far, as to ſlay all the children *from two years old and under*, when one year, or half

* *Toldoth Jeſchu*, publiſhed by Huldrick at Leyden, 1705, 8vo. p. 11, 12. But perhaps he might take the fact from St. Matthew, only perverting it, as he doth abſurdly, to his own purpoſe.

† John xx. 30, 31. xxi. 25.

a year, if not leſs, would have anſwered his end as well? Now here perhaps we commonly miſtake the Evangeliſt. For learned men have held, that the original word, tranſlated, *from two years*, may mean, not, from two years completed, but from two years begun; from the entrance into the ſecond year. But if that be doubtful: yet *Herod*, notwithſtanding that he inquired exactly, when the ſtar appeared to the wiſe men, could not be ſure, nor they tell him, whether it appeared to them exactly at the birth of the child, or ſome time after it. Nor do we know, how long it might be after that appearance, that they were able to ſettle their affairs and begin their journey; nor from what diſtance they came, nor what hindrances might happen in their way; nor what ſtay they might make at *Jeruſalem* before *Herod* ſent for them; and then, before he diſmiſſed them: nor conſequently, how old the child was when they ſaw him. The ſlaughter of the innocents is appointed in our calendar to be commemorated three days after the nativity. If that was ſuppoſed to be the real time, the meaning muſt have been, not to place it, or the coming of the wiſe men, prepoſterouſly, before the appearance of the ſtar, which is fixed in our calendar to the twelfth day, but to place it almoſt a year after. And if the child could either in reality, or in *Herod*'s imagination, be almoſt a year old; a wretch of ſuch unſpeakable jealouſy as he was, and whoſe expreſs character it is, in the Jewiſh hiſtorian, rather to go too far in his fears and ſuſpicions, than fall ſhort*, would by no means think it ſafe, eſpecially in his paſſion, to give an order extending to much leſs than two years.

Theſe, I think, are all the objections and doubts, that can well be raiſed in relation to this part of the goſpel narrative. And if any of them hath received a more ſatisfactory anſwer, than it was beforehand imagined could be given; a modeſt and equitable mind will be ready to conclude, that other ſcripture difficulties alſo may in all likelihood be fairly ſolved, whether the particular manner of doing it appear at preſent, or not.

It will now be aſked, what uſe we are to make of this piece of hiſtory? And here perhaps it may be worth while juſt to obſerve, that in the firſt place we ſhould be careful not to make a bad

* Ant. l. xvi. c. 8. §. 2.

a bad one. For a very bad and abſurd one hath been derived down, though I hope not to many of the preſent generation from the times of popiſh ignorance: in which perſons imagined, that the day of the week, on which maſs was annually performed in honour of theſe children, thence called *Childermaſs* day, was an unlucky one throughout the year, and unfit for the beginning of any buſineſs. But what ſhadow of pretence is there, that becauſe we commemorate then *Herod*'s doing a very wicked thing, we ſhould abſtain from doing ſuch right and proper things, as fall in our way? Not only this fancy, but all of this kind, are utterly without foundation in reaſon, ſcripture, primitive chriſtianity, or daily experience, if people will but mind what paſſes, with common care and ſenſe. They ſerve to no one good purpoſe whatever: they fetter the hand of perſons; and diſquiet their minds with ſuperſtitions, which, at the ſame time, are profane and irreligious, fears and obſervances; as if the providence of God did not always equally watch over us in our lawful undertakings; but he hath given ſome days out of his own hands into thoſe of the wicked one. Weak minds, it is true, may fall into ſuch errors inconſiderately without much blame. But to caſt them off, when you are warned of the nature of them, is an evident duty. I proceed to the proper uſes.

And ſurely one of them is, to obſerve, how pitiable they are. who live under the arbitrary government of deſpotic princes, that may do, as often as their paſſions prompt them, the cruelleſt actions without controul; and to thank God from the bottom of our hearts, that we live in a land of law and liberty, where no ſuch bloody commands, as thoſe of *Herod*, can be iſſued forth: but we enjoy ſecurely whatever is dear to us; and the meaneſt, while innocent, hath nothing to fear from the greateſt.

Another point is, to take notice, for a caution to us, what amazing lengths of ſin human creatures are capable of going, unleſs they ſtop themſelves at firſt; eſpecially when love of power and dominion hurries them on: and how poſſible it is, for the vileſt of deſigns to be covered, as *Herod* did his, with pretences of the utmoſt zeal for religion. Nor ſhould we omit to remark at the ſame time, how painful the agitations of an evil heart muſt ſurely be, while it is working itſelf up to reſolutions and deeds of ſuch horror, and how terrifying its reflections

flections afterwards. But eſpecially we ſhould dwell on this meditation, which ariſes moſt naturally from the ſubject before us, that oppoſing our own wiſdom to that of heaven is the groſſeſt of all follies. Doubtleſs the crafty monarch, when he gave out his orders, applauded within himſelf more than a little the prudence of this maſter-ſtroke: and diſpiſed the cowardly politicians that have ſcruples, and ſtop at half way. But *why boaſteſt thou thyſelf, thou tyrant, that thou canſtdo miſchief, whereas the goodneſs of God endureth yet daily**? Through that wicked men will always fail, either of the point, at which they are aiming, or of the happineſs, which they expected from it. *Herod* failed even of the firſt. The infants, whom he would have wiſhed to ſpare, he deſtroyed: the infant, whom alone he wiſhed to deſtroy, eſcaped him. So he plunged himſelf into the deepeſt guilt, and gave up his memory to endleſs infamy; and got nothing by it of what he hoped. Thus was he *mocked*, not ſo properly *of the wiſe men*, though by means of them, as of God himſelf; according to the prediction, many ages before, concerning him, and all reſembling him. *Why do the heathen ſo furiouſly rage together, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth ſtand up, and the rulers take counſel together againſt the Lord, and againſt his anointed. He, that dwelleth in heaven, ſhall laugh them to ſcorn: the Lord ſhall have them in deriſion*†. Nor was he diſappointed only, which he might know in this life, though we are not ſure he did, but called ſoon after, in a dreadful and exemplary manner, to his final account: dying in all the agonies of a body tortured with a complication of noiſome diſeaſes, and a ſoul driven to the extremity of fury and deſpair.

From ſuch diſpenſations of providence as this, and from the gracious promiſes of God's holy word, his church, though tenderly affected by the wickedneſs of its perſecutors, as well as the frequent ſufferings of its members, may yet learn to look beyond both, and contemplate with triumph its own ſecurity; the ſhameful defeats of the former, and, even if they appear to ſucceed, the glorious rewards of the latter. *The virgin, the daughter of Sion, hath deſpiſed thee, and laughed thee to ſcorn: the daughter of Jeruſalem hath ſhaken her head at thee*‡. Hence the days, on which the apoſtles and others died martyrs have

* Pſ. lii. 1, 2. † Pſ. ii. 1, 2, 4. ‡ Iſ. xxxvii. 22.

have been joyfully obſerved as their birth days: and ſhedding their blood, conſidered as ſowing ſeed for the future increaſe of believers. Hence alſo the memory of theſe infants hath been celebrated in the aſſemblies of chriſtians from the primitive times: as we read in a work, that hath been aſcribed to *Origen*, who lived 1500 years ago*. For their murder was regarded as a martyrdom undergone by them in deed, though not in will; ſince they loſt their lives on Chriſt's account, and, as the collect of our church for this feſtival expreſſes it, *glorified God by their deaths*; were inſtrumental in making the birth of his Son, and his watchful care of him, remarkable in the higheſt degree.

Let us therefore likewiſe pay due regard to their memory: and look on it as their unſpeakable happineſs, that they were ſent, on ſuch an account, by the tyrant's ſword, to heaven, in the morning of their days, ſecure from the danger of living to be wicked here, and miſerable hereafter. Let us alſo apply the ſame conſideration to any ſimiliar affliction of our own: for we cannot undergo a ſeverer, and few, if any, upon earth, have ever undergone ſo ſevere a one, as that of the poor parents of theſe children. Let us recollect from this inſtructive leſſon, that the ſharpeſt ſufferings may fall on the moſt innocent perſons; that the neareſt of our relations, and deareſt of our bleſſings, are God's property more than our own; but that if he takes them from us, he not only can, but unleſs it be our fault will, make us ample amends in a better world: and that therefore, though we may lawfully mourn the loſs of them, yet we ought meekly to ſubmit to it: ſupported by the hope of a bleſſed reſurrection for them and ourſelves; and applying to our own caſe, in a higher ſenſe, what was originally ſaid, perhaps in a lower, to *Rachel, weeping for her children: thus ſaith the Lord, reſtrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work ſhall be rewarded, and they ſhall come again from the land of the enemy*†.

* Hom. 3. in diverſos. † Jer xxxi. 15, 16.

SERMON LXXXVI.

The Happiness of a Godly Life.

Psalm cxxviii. 5, 6.

The Lord ſhall bleſs thee out of Zion, and thou ſhalt ſee the good of Jeruſalem all the days of thy life.

Yea, thou ſhalt ſee thy childrens children, and peace upon Iſrael.

THE ſubject of this pſalm is declared in the firſt verſe. *Bleſſed is every one, that feareth the Lord, that walketh in his ways.* For *godlineſs is profitable unto all things, having promiſe of the life that now is, and of that which is to come*[*]. The preſent happineſs attending it was indeed ſomewhat more viſible, while there was more need it ſhould, in thoſe earlier times, when the future rewards of it were leſs clearly diſcovered. But in every ſucceeding age alſo, the practice of religion and virtue hath appeared to all prudent inquirers, the likelieſt and ſureſt way to avoid the miſeries of life, and ſecure the enjoyments of it. The firſt advantage, which the pſalmiſt promiſes to the pious, comprehends in general health and ſucceſs in their affairs. *For thou ſhalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy ſhalt thou be, and it ſhall be well with thee.* The next is a particular bleſſing of the neareſt concern; the poſſeſſion of domeſtic and conjugal felicity, in the midſt of a large and well ordered family. *Thy wife ſhall be as a fruitful vine by the ſides of thine houſe: thy children like olive plants round about thy table.* For ſuch plants would ſoon afford both an agreeable ſhelter to thoſe who feaſt under them in the open air, as the eaſtern manner was, and a conſiderable profit to the owners of them. Delight, ſecurity, and plenty at home, being uſually the

[*] 1 Tim. iv. 8.

the principal objects of deſire, the pſalmiſt lays an emphatical ſtreſs on them, by adding, *Behold, thus ſhall the man be bleſſed, that feareth the Lord.* But ſtill, as good perſons can never thoroughly reliſh their own private welfare, if the community ſuffers at the ſame time, or calamities are likely to befall it ſoon, an aſſurance is given them in the laſt place, that their exemplary obedience to the laws of God will, through his mercy, contribute to their being witneſſes of the proſperity, both of their country and their deſcendants during a long courſe of years: *The Lord ſhall bleſs thee out of Zion, and thou ſhalt ſee the good of Jeruſalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou ſhalt ſee thy childrens children, and peace upon Iſrael*: in which concluding part of this moſt pleaſing view even of the preſent condition of religious and virtuous perſons, we have it ſignified to us,

I. That a large portion of their happineſs conſiſts in the flouriſhing ſtate of their country.

II. That his happineſs is greatly increaſed by a proſpect, that their own poſterity will continue to flouriſh with it.

III. That both theſe things depend on, and are to be expected from, the divine benediction.

I. That a large portion of their happineſs conſiſts in the flouriſhing ſtate of their country.

Every thing hath an influence on our enjoyments, in proportion to the ſhare which it hath in our affections. And affection to the public never fails to be remarkably ſtrong in worthy breaſts. The complete character indeed of ſocial virtue, if conſidered in theory, is good will towards all men. And no concern for a part deſerves praiſe, if it be inconſiſtent with benevolence to the whole. But the whole, even of this earth, is an object ſo vaſt, that few, if any, can preſerve in their minds a fixed regard to it, or entertain the ſmalleſt hope of doing it ſervice. Therefore mankind is advantageouſly divided into many particular ſocieties. And a zeal in the members of each for the benefit of their own deſerves, not only to be encouraged as a moſt uſeful quality, but honoured, as a moſt laudable one. It ſhews a rightneſs and greatneſs of mind, capable of being affected by a common intereſt: it ſhews the moſt amiable of virtues, love, towards a large part of our fellow-creatures, and implies nothing contrary towards the reſt. For the real good of every people in the world is compatible with the real

good of every other. To rule and to oppreſs is no good to any: and peace and liberty and friendly intercourſe for mutual convenience all the nations of the earth may enjoy at once.

This virtue indeed, as well as others, hath been frequently miſunderſtood: and falſe appearances of it unhappily purſued. Yet even then ſo much rightneſs of intention towards their own community was mixed in the minds of men with wrong behaviour towards the nations round them, that their injuſtice, though monſtrous, hath been always conſidered with indulgence, nay often admired as heroiſm. And the only people, too ſeverely cenſured on this head, hath been the Jewiſh; whoſe very law ſome have charged with teaching ill will to the reſt of the world, though it hath more precepts of compaſſion and tenderneſs towards them, than perhaps any other. They were indeed commanded to ſet out with extirpating the *Canaanites*, and planting themſelves in their land. But well might heaven decree, after a forbearance of ſeveral ages, the deſtruction of theſe wretches, abandoned at once to the moſt unnatural luſts, and the moſt ſhocking barbarities: and (which made their recovery hopeleſs) both of them practiſed, as acts of their religion. Nor could the Jews be more ſtrongly warned againſt committing ſuch enormities, than by being appointed to puniſh them; as God may certainly puniſh, either by his own hand, or by whom he will. But with all mankind ever after, they were to live in peace: only avoiding intimacies likely to corrupt them, and extinguiſh that profeſſion of faith in the one true God, which they were deſigned to preſerve for the general benefit. Accordingly they were, when free, as good neighbours, and when conquered, as good ſubjects, as other men; till heathen perſecution provoked them to hate even thoſe heathens, who were no perſecutors: and then it was time for our Saviour to teach them, not the love of their country (for of that, ſuch as it was, they had too much) but the univerſal love of all men: a doctrine equally needful, though on different accounts, for the *Romans* alſo. Yet he, and his great apoſtle St. *Paul*, were ſhining examples of moſt affectionate concern for their brethren of the houſe of *Iſrael*, even while they received the cruelleſt treatment from them. And, though the firſt diſciples were chiefly private perſons, under one abſolute dominion, and that, of unbelieving magiſtrates, and conſequently

ly no other political injunctions, than thoſe of dutiful obedience and uniformly moral behaviour, could with propriety be laid upon them; yet theſe are inculcated with ſuch diligence, and grounded on ſuch principles in the New Teſtament, that as ample a proviſion is made by them for the public welfare as then was feaſible: and whoever will ſeriouſly conſider the goſpel rules, will be far from aſſerting, with a late author *, that the love of his country is a virtue purely voluntary in a chriſtian.

But, though every pious perſon will always conſider the happineſs of his country, as a very intereſting part of his own, yet the degree in which he will conſider it ſo, muſt greatly depend on the relation to it, in which he ſtands. And therefore they who are diſtinguiſhed by the more important relations, whoſe office and buſineſs conſiſts in being *the miniſters of God for good* †, to numbers, to nations of their fellow-creatures at once, they muſt have exalted ſatisfaction in ſeeing *the pleaſure of the Lord proſper in their hands* ‡. Every inſtance of national felicity muſt warm their breaſts with ſingular conſolation: above all, when they are conſcious of its ariſing from their own rightneſs of mind, and vigilance of conduct: when they know they have deſerved from the people under them that excellent character of *David*: *he fed them with a faithful and true heart, and ruled them prudently with all his power* §.

II. The next thing to be learnt from the text is, that the happineſs, accruing to good men from the flouriſhing ſtate of their country, is greatly encreaſed by the proſpect, that their own poſterity will continue to flouriſh with it.

The deſire of exerting our tendereſt affections, which are the conjugal and parental, and leaving repreſentatives of ourſelves behind us, to preſerve our name, inherit our ſubſtance, and carry on the deſigns of providence on earth, is deeply rooted in our frame: it hath always influenced the conduct of men, in proportion as they have lived agreeably to the ſimplicity of nature: and they who have thought the abſolute reſtraint of this inclination the way to higher degrees of purity and ſpiritual perfection, have entertained a notion as evidently wrong, as the divine conſtitution of things is right. But though ſuch imagi-

* Lord Shafteſbury. † Rom. xiii. 4. ‡ Iſ. liii. 10.
§ Pſ. lxxviii. 73.

imaginations are groundleſs, preclude the exerciſe of many virtues, and weaken human ſociety: yet the indulgence of irregular liberties, however favourably their own or common practice may induce perſons to think of them, produces effects far more hurtful: overturns all good order, deſtroys the peace of families, introduces endleſs confuſions and diſtreſſes, cauſes moſt afflicting breaches of faith, tempts to moſt execrable barbarities, effaces gradually all moral principles, and begets more crimes and ſorrows, than almoſt any one ſin beſides. The ſacred inſtitution of marriage therefore is of the utmoſt importance to the innocence and the happineſs of mankind. They who avoid it, as engaging them in cares and troubles, diſtruſt the goodneſs of God, who hath made every article of proper behaviour, on the whole, our preſent intereſt; and they who diſcourage it, as many do grievouſly, though not profeſſedly, by running into needleſs expences and refinements, pervert, for the ſake of vanities and follies, the plain way, which heaven hath marked out for public ſtrength and private comfort.

Now if a likelihood, merely that their offſpring ſhall partake in the general felicity, is able to fill the minds of men with great emotions; what tranſporting reflections muſt they have, whoſe deſcendants appear deſtined by the ſtations of their parents to be authors of that felicity in their turn and degree! How ſtrongly muſt ſuch a hope induce them to ſecure by good example and inſtruction this higheſt honour and bleſſedneſs to ſuch as are to inherit their dignities! And how warm a return of moſt affectionate gratitude will they merit and receive from mankind, if virtue and liberty ſhall not only be ſupported by them in the preſent age, but tranſmitted to ſucceeding ones, by their pious care of forming their progeny to the knowledge and the love of public good! The proſpect only of *childrens children* would have little joy in it, without that of *peace upon Iſrael*: without a reaſonable expectation of their contributing to the true glory of the family, from which they ſpring, and the true happineſs of the nation, over which they are to preſide. But when due proviſion is made for this, both ſovereign and people may take up the words of the Pſalmiſt: *Like as the arrows in the hand of the giant, even ſo are the young children. Happy is the man that hath his quiver*

full

*full of them: they ſhall not be aſhamed, when they ſpeak with their enemies in the gate**.

But then, as ever we hope to ſee either our public or our private happineſs continue, we muſt be careful to remember,

III. That both depend on the divine benediction.

Except the Lord build the houſe, their labour is but loſt that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.—Children, and the fruit of the womb, are an heritage and gift that cometh of the Lord†. Theſe are the expreſs declarations of holy writ: and both reaſon and experience humbly ſubſcribe to them. It is not indeed poſſible for us in many caſes to diſcern particularly in what manner the providence of God conducts things: but we may plainly diſcern in general, that as the whole courſe of nature is nothing elſe than the free appointment, which he hath been pleaſed to make; as the motions of the inanimate world proceed from thoſe which he originally impreſſed upon it; and all the thoughts and actions of intelligent beings are doubtleſs abſolutely ſubject to the influence of their Maker; ſince we ſee they are greatly ſubject, and often when they perceive it not, to that of their fellow-creatures;) it muſt be in his power by various ways, perhaps the more effectual for being unknown, to diſpoſe of every thing ſo, as may beſt anſwer his wiſe purpoſes of mercy or correction. And as he evidently can do this, it is likewiſe evidently worthy of him to do it; for the higheſt of his titles is that of the moral governor of the univerſe; and therefore, we may firmly believe the ſcripture aſſuring us, that he doth it in fact; that he makes *all things work together for good to them that love him*‡ and *curſes the very bleſſings*§ of thoſe who love him not.

Whenever then we find our affairs going on to our content, our families flouriſhing, our healths conſtant, our hearts full of exultation, and dictating language to us like that of *David, in my proſperity I ſaid, I ſhall never be removed*; let us be ſure alſo like him to add, *thou, Lord, of thy goodneſs haſt made my hill ſo ſtrong*‖. In the hand of God it is, whether we ſhall have the things that we wiſh for; whether, when we have them, they ſhall prove comforts or afflictions, the joy or the grief of our ſouls; whether laſtly, if they are ever ſo dear to us, they ſhall

* Pſ. cxxvii. 5, 6. † Pſ. cxxvii. 1, 2, 4. ‡ Rom. viii. 28.
§ Mal. ii. 2. ‖ Pſ. xxx. 6.

ſhall remain with us, or be ſnatched from us: and therefore, it unſpeakably concerns us all to intereſt providence in our behalf. They whom God favours moſt, are by no means exempt from ſufferings: but he not only will always make religious perſons full amends hereafter, but ordinarily grant them deliverance and conſolation here. Thus the Pſalmiſt, immediately after his above-mentioned triumph, had cauſe to ſubjoin, *thou didſt turn thy face from me, and I was troubled**. But it follows, *then cried I unto thee, and gat me to my Lord right humbly*†. *Thou turneſt my heavineſs into joy: thou haſt put off my ſackcloth, and girded me with gladneſs*‡.

Perſecutions indeed, more or leſs, the apoſtle hath told us, *all ſhall ſuffer, that will live godly in Chriſt*§: and partly on that very account. But in theſe, they ſhall be enabled *to take pleaſure*‖, even when they are the heavieſt: and uſually they are very light, compared with the calamities, which the wicked bring on their own heads. The natural tendency of chriſtian virtues is to happineſs; of ſin, to miſery: God hath appointed this tendency, and he will make it effectual. If nations, in the midſt of their wealth and tranquillity, will not ſhew they are ſenſible, that he beſtows them, he will juſtly prove it by taking them away. And if thoſe perſons, whom he hath raiſed to ſuperior honours, and favoured with marks of diſtinguiſhed goodneſs, will ungratefully forget, by whoſe power and for whoſe ſervice they were thus exalted and bleſſed, he can eaſily make them know by unexpected judgements, *that the Moſt High ruleth in the kingdom of men*¶, *and doth according to his will in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth.* But princes and their people, joining together in thankful obedience to the laws of their great benefactor, will be happy in themſelves and each other, will *ſhine as lights in the world***; and, to ſpeak in the language of the prophet, *upon all their glory there ſhall be a defence*††. *For God will ſave Sion, and build the cities of Judah.—The poſterity alſo of his ſervants ſhall inherit it; and they, that love his name, ſhall dwell therein*‡‡. *Their children ſhall continue, and their ſeed be eſtabliſhed before him*§§.

* Ver. 7. † Ver. 8. ‡ Ver. 12. § 2 Tim. iii. 12.
‖ 2 Cor. xii. 10 ¶ Dan. iv. 25. Phil ii. 15. †† Iſ. iv. 5.
‡‡ Pſ. lxix. 6, 37. §§ Pſ. cii. 28.

SER.

SERMON LXXXVII.

The Rational Idea of a Christian Fast.

MATTH. vi. 16.

Moreover, when ye faſt, be not as the hypocrites.

THE practice of faſting from a principle of religion has been thought of by different perſons in ſo very different a manner; ſome placing it amongſt the higheſt duties, whilſt others account it mere ſuperſtition: and a great part of thoſe, who obſerve it the moſt rigidly, are ſo little improved by it in true goodneſs: that, I hope, diſcourſing on this ſubject may be uſeful in general, as well as particularly ſeaſonable at preſent, to direct your judgement and behaviour in relation to it. And therefore, I have choſen to treat of it from words of the greateſt authority; thoſe of our bleſſed Saviour: which contain,

I. A ſuppoſition, that religious faſting would be uſed amongſt his followers: *When ye faſt.*

II. A caution againſt uſing it amiſs: *Be not as the hypocrites.*

I. A ſuppoſition, that religious faſting would be uſed amongſt his followers: which indeed he muſt ſuppoſe of courſe, unleſs he forbad it; becauſe the cuſtom had very long been, and was then, univerſal in the world. Not only the people of the great city and empire of *Nineveh*, as we read in ſcripture, but the *Egyptians*, *Greeks*, *Romans*, almoſt all nations, of whoſe religion we have any particular accounts, appear to have been led, either by nature or ancient tradition, to abſtain from their food, on certain occaſions, as an exerciſe of piety. The Jewiſh law could not be the original of an obſervance,

that had ſpread ſo wide: eſpecially, as that law appoints but one ſingle day in the whole year to be kept as a public faſt, and gives no orders for private faſting at all. Yet we find, from the early times of their common-wealth downwards, many other public faſts obſerved by them, as exigencies required: we find the prophets approving and enjoining them, and directing how they are to be ſolemnized: we find the moſt exemplary in goodneſs amongſt them, taking this way of humbling themſelves before God in ſecret, not only on perſonal and domeſtic, but national accounts, and graciouſly accepted in ſo doing.

The ſame uſage continued to our Saviour's days. For we read in St. *Luke**, of *Anna* the propheteſs, that *ſhe ſerved God with faſtings and prayers night and day.* Indeed by this time, over and above ſeveral yearly faſts appointed by authority†, the ſtricter ſort obſerved two every week voluntarily‡. And not only the Phariſees, but *John's* diſciples alſo, faſted often§. Nor doth our bleſſed Lord condemn any part of theſe things: but, leaving the frequency of faſting to public and private prudence, regulates only the manner of it; and by ſo doing, plainly treats it as a practice, intended for perpetual uſe. It is true, he doth not, in ſo many words, *command* his diſciples to faſt: he only ſaith, *when ye faſt.* But ſo he had ſaid juſt before, *when thou doſt thine alms*‖, *when thou prayeſt*¶. And had he not deſigned, that faſting ſhould be conſidered in ſome degree as a duty alſo; he would never have promiſed a reward to the right performance of it, as he doth in the next verſe but one, after the text. And beſides, he not only faſted himſelf, in a manner quite beyond our imitation, but declared, that though then his diſciples did not faſt, yet after *he was taken from them, they ſhould***: which they verified accordingly. *Cornelius* indeed was not yet a chriſtian, when he faſted to the ninth hour††: but that was amongſt the means of his becoming one. We read in the following chapters of the *Acts*, that congregations, under the guidance of prophets and apoſtles, faſted on more occaſions than one‡‡. St. *Paul* enjoins private perſons

* Luke ii. 37. † Zach viii. 19. ‡ Luke xviii. 12. § Matth. ix. 14.
‖ Verſe 2. ¶ Verſe. 6. ** Matth. ix. 15. †† Acts x. 30.
‡‡ Acts xiii. 2, 3, xiv. 23.

perſons to give themſelves at times *to faſting and prayer**. The whole chriſtian church, from the beginning, hath both eſteemed and practiſed it not a little: and to this day both the eccleſiaſtical and civil powers continue to preſcribe it. But for yet fuller ſatisfaction, and indeed for our direction alſo, let us inquire more particularly, what its meaning and uſes are.

One very uſeful meaning is, to expreſs our ſorrow for having offended God, and our ſenſe of not deſerving the leaſt of his favours. By ſome it hath been thought, that our firſt parents introduced it, as a penitential memorial of their eating the forbidden fruit: which indeed it might very properly expreſs. But without inſiſting on this, for which we have no warrant, abſtaining for ſome time from our daily food ſignifies, moſt naturally, that we are unworthy of it; and can take no comfort in it, whilſt we are under the divine diſpleaſure. And as anciently, every thing of importance was denoted, eſpecially in the eaſtern countries, by actions as well as words; this was probably the original purpoſe, for which men uſed faſting. And it was then ſometimes extended to children and cattle; in token, that the parents and owners of them had forfeited the deareſt bleſſings, and moſt valuable conveniences of life†. It is true, a proper confeſſion in words would have expreſſed the ſame thing, that this ceremony doth, and ſomewhat more clearly, unleſs it were explained in words. But in all likelihood it uſually was: or if not, the difficulty of underſtanding it cannot be accounted great. And where it is appointed by authority, or prevails by cuſtom, as the eſtabliſhed method of ſignifying humiliation, we are as much bound to comply with it, as with any other appointment or cuſtom; and ſhould be as juſtly thought diſobedient or unſociable, if we refuſed: even though it had no peculiar advantages to compenſate for its being of leſs obvious meaning: whereas indeed it hath conſiderable ones. For words alone are far from carrying with them that energy and influence upon the mind, which the ſuperadded ſolemnity of ſuch an abſtinence muſt, even in private caſes; and much more, when whole aſſemblies, and cities, and countries, join in it. But above all, when either perſons or nations have been remarkably wicked, ſuch moving and afflicting

* 1 Cor. vii. 6. † Joel ii. 16. Jonah iii. 7, 8. Judith iv. 10.

acknowledgements of it are ſingularly adapted to produce more powerful and laſting impreſſions on thoſe, who make uſe of them; and by that means to render them fitter objects of divine mercy.

And, beſides the good effects it may have, as a ſtrong outward mark of repentance, it may be a cauſe, by its phyſical effects, of our feeling greater degrees of inward conviction. The faculties of many perſons are overloaded by continual exceſs, and *the corruptible body preſſeth down the ſoul** : nor can it exert itſelf, till the burthen upon it is lightened. And without what is commonly called exceſs, a conſtant courſe of high or full living hath ſo powerful a tendency to immerſe our thoughts in worldly objects, and make us, both indolent as to our eternal intereſts, and fearleſs of the conſequences of ſuch indolence: that all, who paſs their days in the free enjoyment of plenty, have need frequently to interrupt their indulgences, however lawful in their nature: to admoniſh themſelves, by ſo doing, that they have much more important concerns, than the gratification of ſenſe and eaſe: and to view the ſtate of their ſouls with attentive thoughtfulneſs; which abſtinence, and its proper companion retirement, would beget. Aſſuredly numbers of them would then ſee their condition in reſpect of God, and a future life, in a very different light, from that, which warm blood, gay ſpirits, and preſumptuous imaginations place it in. And for want of ſuch views it is, that ſo many are groſsly wicked, and ſo many more very imperfectly and inſufficiently good; whom a habit of conſiderate ſelf-reſtraint would render by degrees indifferent to earthly enjoyments, and ſolicitous for thoſe of a better world. Nay, even ſingle acts of ſuch reſtraint will uſually, for the time, lower our paſſions into ſome good meaſure of compoſedneſs, and make our ſorrow for ſin humbler and deeper: on both which accounts faſting is called in ſcripture, *afflicting the ſoul*†. For it mortifies the deſires of the ſenſitive part, and enlivens the remorſe of the rational. By theſe means, it may contribute much to render our faith of inviſible things more lively, and our devotions more fervent: for which reaſon faſting is always underſtood in ſcripture, and always ought in practice, to be accompanied by prayer. And in proportion as it qualifies us to pray as we ought, it aſſures us

* Wiſd. ix. 15. † Iſ. lviii. 3, 5.

us of obtaining our requeſts; whether they be for averting God's judgements, or deriving his mercies upon us, in our public capacity or private.

Theſe are ſome of the ſpiritual benefits, for I omit to mention the corporeal ones, though very conſiderable, which recommend faſting. And ſurely they are at leaſt ſufficient to keep every pretender to ſerioufneſs from deriding it, or thinking meanly of ſuch as practiſe it. Though any one may judge, or find, it ever ſo uſeleſs to himſelf; yet he cannot well know what it may be to others. And therefore, the rule of ſcripture is in this ſenſe perfectly juſt: *let not him, that eateth, deſpiſe him, that eateth not**. If he doth, his contempt may light on characters of the higheſt eminence in wiſdom and goodneſs; as it happened in the caſe of the royal pſalmiſt: *the reproaches of them, that reproached thee, are fallen upon me. I wept, and chaſtened my ſoul with faſting; and that was turned to my reproof*†.

But as we ought, by all the prudence we can, to ſpare others the guilt, and ourſelves the uneaſineſs and provocation, of ſuch unkind treatment: ſo we ſhould be yet more careful not to deſerve it in any degree: and ſhould therefore take diligent notice, that the text contains,

II. A caution againſt uſing this practice amiſs. Our Saviour indeed prohibits expreſsly no other abuſes, than ſuch as hypocrites committed: and mentions, of thoſe, only one in particular. But as he certainly meant that, merely for a ſpecimen of many; and deſigned, that all ſhould be avoided; it will be uſeful to ſet before you others alſo, moſt of which are condemned expreſsly ſomewhere in the word of God; and all implicity here.

Faſting is a duty, not for its own ſake: for neither *meat*, nor abſtaining from meat, *commendeth us to God*‡: but for the ſake of its good effects. Proportionably therefore, as in any perſon's caſe it is found, on impartial and full trial, to fail of thoſe effects, or to produce bad ones, which outweigh or equal them, it ceaſes to be a duty; any farther than the obligation of ſetting no hurtful example, and giving no offence, may juſtly demand regard. And as the caſes of different perſons differ extremely, it is either wicked tyranny, or pitiable unſkilfulneſs,

* Rom. xiv. 3. † Pſ. lxix. 9, 10. ‡ 1 Cor. viii. 8.

neſs, to enjoin, as the church of *Rome* doth, all perſons to abſtain, ſo often, and for ſo long together, from eating fleſh; and all perſons of ſuch an age, and ſuch a ſtate of life and health, to eat only once in a day, or little more, of what they are ſuffered to eat. Preſcribing ſuch rules, as theſe, to the whole world, muſt bring hardſhips and diſtreſſes on millions of perſons, eſpecially the poor, from which they can receive no good, but may ſuffer much harm. It will give them wrong notions of religion, as conſiſting principally in outward obſervances; and multiply grievouſly the temptations of ſin, by adding imaginary duties, that will often be more difficult than the real ones. They allow indeed ſome occaſional exceptions from theſe general rules: and yet, even did they alſo allow perſons to judge for themſelves, when their circumſtances came within theſe exceptions, it would ſtill be a ſource of endleſs doubts and ſcruples to timorous minds. But beſides the uncertainty, whether they may in conſcience deſire to be excepted, they are ſubjected to the will and pleaſure of others, whether that deſire ſhall be granted; and to a large expence for it, if it be: And theſe and other diſpenſations are one fund of wealth to the clergy and court of *Rome*, which they have uſed to the vileſt purpoſes. But in order to our judging rightly, in what degree this will be expedient for us, divers things ought to be conſidered. Not many indeed of our church, in the preſent age, run at all into exceſſive auſterities: very far from it, God knows. But if any do, they ought to be warned: and though none did here, the chriſtian doctrine ought to be vindicated from the imputation of leading to ſuch extremes any where.

Faſting conſiſts in abſtaining, wholly or in part, from our ordinary food. Abſtaining wholly the former part of the day is undoubtedly the natural, and ſhould be the general method of doing this. But they, in whoſe caſe good reaſons forbid it, may, by properly reſtraining themſelves in the latter part, keep their faſt to all good purpoſes, after they have, in common ſpeech, broken it. Continuing a total abſtinence longer than a day can hardly ever be, and ſo long ſeldom is, either uſeful or ſafe. And though a conſiderable approach towards abſtinence for the whole day, if conducted prudently, may be allowed at proper intervals for ſome ſmall time, when deſigned for ſelf-puniſhment in great faults; as indeed leſſening our faſt into a trifle, on any occaſion, public or private, would be mocking

God,

God, cheating ourſelves, and giving ſcandal or bad example to others: yet when ſubduing irregular appetites and paſſions is the end in view, moderate ſeverity, and barely, if at all, exceeding the ſtrictneſs of an exact and rigorous temperance, but long continued, will be moſt effectual.

Abſtaining from particular ſorts of food, from fleſh-meat for inſtance, as the ſtrongeſt and moſt pleaſing ſort, if it be not hurtful, is very proper; and on public faſts eſpecially, as being the common and moſt viſible mark of compliance with what public authority enjoins. But ſtill this abſtinence, beſides that laying a great ſtreſs upon it leads to ſuperſtition, or at leaſt affords it countenance, may, to ſome perſons, be no ſelf-denial at all, but conſiſtent with moſt luxurious indulgence. There are many, to whom ſeveral ſorts of fiſh are more delicious, than land-animals; and perhaps full as nutritive. Nay, methods have been invented, by which the palate is hardly ever ſo much pleaſed, as when it is pretended to be mortified. The true direction then concerning the fare of our faſting ſeaſons, is that, which the example of the prophet *Daniel* furniſhes: *In thoſe days I ate no pleaſant bread:* that is, nothing contrived to gratify or provoke the appetite, but the plaineſt of wholeſome diet. That we ought to be full as abſtemious in what we drink, as what we eat, is very clear; and both are put on a level in the ſame paſſage of *Daniel*: *Neither came fleſh nor wine in my mouth.* The ſcripture alſo condemns every other needleſs indulgence at ſuch times. *Wherefore have we faſted ſay they, and thou ſeeſt not? Behold, in the day of your faſt, ye find pleaſure.* Nor can there be a doubt, but intemperance, or even exceſs of gaiety, either deſignedly preceding a faſt, as is common in the *Romiſh* carnaval, or following one, as I fear may ſometimes be the caſe in other churches, intirely deſtroys the religious uſe of it.

Deluding ourſelves by ſuch contrivances, and attempting to impoſe upon God the performance of ſome ſmall part of what he requires, inſtead of the whole, is as real, and more abſurd and fatal hypocriſy, than endeavouring to deceive our fellow-creatures. It therefore comes directly under the prohibition of the text: and we have peculiar need to be on our guard againſt it at preſent. Of late years we have obſerved public faſts with more ſtrictneſs and devotion, than had been ſeen amongſt us in the memory of man. And ſo far all was well.

But

But have we been afterwards uniformly pious and virtuous, watchful againſt all ſin, and occaſions of ſin, attentive to our ſpiritual ſtate and the great concerns of eternity? Or have we thought, that crowding the churches for a day, and abſtaining from a folly or two for a winter, perhaps with an ill will, was religion enough to ſave the nation and our ſouls? If any thing like ſuch imaginations have taken hold of us, we have adulterated and debaſed a powerful remedy into an uſeleſs and miſchievous palliative, and while we truſt to it, are farther from the hope of a radical cure than ever. And were we to amend more thoroughly but for a ſhort time only, our caſe will be very little better. *O Ephraim, what ſhall I do unto thee? O Judah, what ſhall I do unto thee? For your goodneſs is as a morning cloud, and as the early due it goeth away* *. Let us therefore, now and at all times, conſcientiouſly beware of this, and every error, in reſpect of religious mortifications. Let us neither ſuperſtitiouſly over-value, nor profanely deſpiſe, inſtitutions for that purpoſe: neither treat ourſelves with unprofitable harſhneſs, nor with hurtful indulgence: neither be influenced by ſervile dread, nor by irreverent preſumption: neither ſubmit our conſciences to the commands of men, as if they were doctrines of God; nor contemptuouſly reject proper helps for obeying the laws of God, as worthleſs inventions of men: neither exalt the means into the ſame rank with the end, nor hope to arrive at the end without the means. Let us, after the example of the holy apoſtle, *ſo run, as not uncertainly; ſo fight, as not beating the air*: but, with ſtrict and yet prudent diſcipline, *keep under the body, and bring it into ſubjection* †. *For every man, that ſtriveth for the maſtery, is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible* ‡. Which that we may obtain, &c.

* Hoſ. vi. 4. † 1 Cor. ix. 26, 27. ‡ 1 Cor. ix. 25.

SER.

SERMON LXXXVIII.

On good Character, or general esteem of Mankind.

Prov. xxii. 1.

A good name is rather to be choſen, than great riches.

It ſeems very natural to wiſh, that amidſt the great variety of things, which on various accounts appear deſirable in this world, we could paſs a right judgment concerning the proportionable value of each: that ſo we might determine, what ſhare of our attention they ſeverally merit; and, when they interfere, which ought to have the preference. Yet this we find to be, in moſt caſes, far beyond our ſkill. Whether power, or wealth, or eaſe, an active or a contemplative life, a private ſtation or a public, this profeſſion and employment or that, be more eligible; always hath been diſputed, and always will. For the deciſion will depend on circumſtances too numerous and too uncertain to be conſidered with exactneſs. And indeed it is for the intereſt of mankind, that the anſwers to queſtions of this ſort ſhould be involved in obſcurity. For, ſuppoſe we all knew how to chuſe, yet we could not all have our choice. And, as the whole muſt conſiſt of very different parts; it is well that our not knowing, which condition would be the beſt for us, contributes to our receiving, as we are bound, whatever falls to our lot, with a chearful acquieſcence in the appointment of Providence.

But though our Maker's wiſdom hath left us greatly in the dark about ſuch matters, in which, taking one courſe or another is but ſeldom of conſiderable, if any, importance to the moſt important of all things, the performance of our duty:

yet, in whatever hath a ſtated connection with that, he hath given us plain directions, both by reaſon and ſcripture, how we are to judge and behave. Now there is nothing more cloſely connected with virtue, than reputation: and therefore he hath connected it as cloſely with our happineſs: not only teaching us, by nature, to eſteem it as the chief of outward bleſſings; but by revelation, to preſerve and cheriſh it with aſſiduous care. The text, which I have read to you, prefers *a good name to great riches*. Another ſaith, it *is better than precious ointment* *: that is, than the coſtlieſt perfumes that were anciently uſed, in the gayeſt entertainments of the voluptuous, or the funeral honours of the great. And throughout the word of God, we are excited by examples, as well as precepts, to aim diligently at *obtaining a good report* †. Accordingly, mankind in all ages have been ſtrongly influenced by this principle; and, in a great meaſure, to what they ought.

But ſtill, as the moſt powerful motives are apt to be ſlighted by ſome, and the righteſt perverted by others: there are numbers, who profeſs to have ſcarce any regard to reputation; and ſtill greater, who pay it a very undue regard. Therefore, it may be uſeful to ſhew you the wrongneſs and the danger,

I. Of having too little concern about it.

II. Of having too much.

I. Of having too little. One meets, not very uncommonly, with thoſe who affect a perfect indifference to what a ſilly or malicious world, that hath nothing to do with them or their affairs, may pleaſe to think or talk about them. I ſay, they affect this; becauſe, for the moſt part, it is mere affectation: and while they pretend not to be moved at all by what is reported of them, they plainly are moved by it greatly: not enough perhaps to conduct themſelves with more diſcretion upon it, (and ſo much the worſe for them;) but enough to be very uneaſy and angry about it. Now what really diſturbs them, it is a folly to put on the air of deſpiſing: and the only ſenſible method is, to take care and avoid it.

But they plead, that avoiding cenſure is impoſſible: people will

* Eccl. vii. 1. † 1 Sam. ii. 24. Prov. xv. 30. Acts vi. 3. x. 22. xvi. 2. Phil. iv. 8. 1 Tim. iii. 7. Heb. xi. 2. 3 John 12.

will ſay ill-natured things, and make ſpiteful conſtructions: ſome will always be raiſing ſtories, and others believing them: and why ſhould one give one's ſelf trouble to prevent what after all cannot be prevented? Nor can it be denied, that the world is very cenſorious: but it is by no means true, that they who keep on their guard, and they who do not, fare alike in it. Sometimes indeed very innocent and prudent perſons may fall under very cruel imputations: but they rarely continue under them. And therefore, if it be not a rule without exception, it is one with but few exceptions, that whoever is much and generally and long evil ſpoken of, hath been faulty: very probably not in the degree, perhaps not in the manner, that is charged: but there hath been either an approach towards it, or a blameable appearance of it, or ſomething or another that ſhould not have been; elſe ſo many would not have judged, or at leaſt have perſiſted in judging, ſo unfavourably. Still their judgment may be a ſinful one. But why ſhould we tempt them to that ſin? It is hurting both them and ourſelves. Profeſſing to deſpiſe the ill opinion of mankind, creates a ſhrewd ſuſpicion, that we have deſerved it. For if we have not; why do we lie ſo quiet under it? Why not explain our paſt conduct, if there be opportunity; or, however, watch ſo carefully over our future behaviour, as by degrees to ſilence calumny? It is our duty, not only to be harmleſs, but uſeful in the world; and of what uſe can any perſon hope to be whom obloquy depreciates, and expoſes to diſlike? It is our duty, not only to be virtuous, but examplary in virtue: and, inſtead of that, we appear examples of wickedneſs, if we neglect aſperſions thrown upon us, when we could wipe them off. And as every new example of it, real or ſeeming, adds new encouragement to it; the worſt of ſinners heinouſly aggravate their ſins, by ſhewing that they are not aſhamed of them; beſides the imprudence of provoking private and public indignation and contempt.

But, let the guilty manage as they will, ſurely the innocent muſt ſee, that their intereſt is, not to confound themſelves with the former, and ſhare in their reproach by diſregarding reputation, but diſtinguiſh themſelves by a conſtant, though unaffected, attention to it. Ill people may have their ends in deſiring that you ſhould appear like them: but your buſineſs is to appear different from them: otherwiſe you are ſo far

virtuous to no purpoſe. And therefore, you forget yourſelf ſtrangely, if you can give up an advantage, that is peculiar to you. A good name, of all things, is what a bad perſon cannot ſecure. And therefore you, that can, ſhould on no account fail of doing it.

The Judgment of others concerning us deſerves Reſpect: and to pay it none, is a ſhocking want of modeſty. Beſides, preſervation of mutual eſteem makes perſons amiable to each other: and in that way contributes largely to their common happineſs. For it is hateful to think of living in the midſt of bad characters only: and that ſingle conſideration ſhould excite us powerfully to keep the face of things from having that look. But further, the ſenſe of ſhame was given us by our Maker for a guard to our ſenſe of duty. And as we want, on many occaſions, every guard that we can have; we know not what evils may follow throwing aſide this. Perſons, who care not what they are thought, are in a very likely way not to care what they do. And therefore, St Paul hath moſt judiciouſly intermixed, as being intimately connected, regard to principle, and regard to character. *Whatſoever things are true, whatſoever things are honourable; whatſoever things are lovely, whatſoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praiſe; think on theſe things* *.

But were contempt of reputation ever ſo conſiſtent with our innocence, it would be greatly contrary to our intereſt notwithſtanding. A loſt, or even a doubtful fame, in ſome points, fixes an almoſt indelible mark upon perſons, which deprives them of many advantages in life, and often delivers them over to ſcorn and wretchedneſs, for the reſt of their days. Nay, even when nothing bad can be ſaid of any one, yet if but little good can, this alone will uſually have an unhappy influence on his future ſituation: whereas an eminently fair character prepoſſeſſes every body in the favour of him who bears it: engages friendly treatment, begets truſt and confidence, gives credit and weight. Such will always be ſought after and employed, reſpected in their proſperity, aſſiſted under Diſtreſſes: in ſhort this diſtinction is, in effect, beyond all that can be named, honour, and power, and wealth.

But then further, it is pleaſure too, which only one other, near

* Phil. iv. 8.

near akin to it, can exceed or equal. For next to the Conſciouſneſs of being good and worthy, that of being eſteemed ſo, eſpecially by thoſe who are ſuch themſelves, is undoubtedly the joyfulleſt feeling in the heart of man, and diffuſes the higheſt ſatisfaction through every intercourſe of life. But very afflicting muſt their inward ſenſations be, who know they are juſtly hated, ſuſpected or deſpiſed: and in the midſt of ſociety muſt wander about, uneſteemed and friendleſs.

Another very material conſideration is, that though offenders often return completely to their duty, it is but ſeldom and imperfectly that they ever regain their characters, when once forfeited: whereas, by preſerving them, they ſecure not only many and great preſent benefits, but the pleaſing proſpect in which our maker hath, with unſpeakable goodneſs, formed us to delight, of leaving an honourable memory behind them for their family to inherit; and a valuable bequeſt it frequently proves: while hereditary infamy is the cruel portion, that others leave to their poſterity and kindred. *Have regard to thy name,* ſaith the wiſe ſon of *Sirach, for that ſhall continue above a thouſand great treaſures of gold. A happy life hath but a few days: but a good name endureth for ever**. On all accounts then it is our wiſdom, as well as our duty, to *provide for honeſt things, not only in the ſight of the Lord, but alſo in the ſight of men*†.

Still, it muſt be owned, there are occaſions on which neglecting both parts of this rule may appear the ſhorteſt way to worldly proſperity. But theſe appearances are often deceitful. And when they prove ſuch, what hath the wretch, who ventures upon this courſe, done? He hath loſt his honour, and loſt his peace, and got nothing for them. But whatever he gets, he will find his bargain at laſt a very dear one. He will feel himſelf inwardly no longer the ſame man, that he was: he will ſee himſelf treated, by the better part of mankind at leaſt, with the coldneſs, which he knows to come ſhort of his deſert; the reſpect paid him by the reſt will be of very uncertain duration; and, while it laſts, he will perceive it, by many a token, to be mere outſide. He will be afraid perpetually, that ſome turn of affairs may take away from him the advantages of his baſeneſs, and leave him only the ignominy of

* Eccluſ. xli. 12, 13. † 2 Cor. viii. 21.

of it. Or, how well ſoever he may eſcape, or how little ſoever he may value, the ſhame of this world; that of the next can neither be avoided nor contemned.

There can be no doubt then, but reputation deſerves a very great regard. And therefore I proceed,

II. To warn you againſt ſhewing an over-great regard to it.

Many ſeem to think, that a fair appearance is all they want: and accordingly take little care to ſupport it by reality. But, without the latter, the former will quickly be ſeen through. And, in the mean time, while few or none elſe know them, their knowledge of themſelves, and perpetual fears that others will find them out, muſt ſurely leave them very ſmall pleaſure in *having*, as the ſcripture expreſſes it, *a name that they live, and being* in truth *dead**.

Many more, if they are guilty of nothing, which the world thinks enormous, imagine they are quite as good as they need to be: forgetting, that *the Lord ſeeth not as man ſeeth*†, but often *that, which is highly eſteemed amongſt men, is abomination in the ſight of God*‡, who knows the ſecret ſprings, whence every word and action flow, let us reflect then, that we are to approve our lives and hearts, not merely to our fellow-creatures; but to our Maker, who is perfect in holineſs: that we may indeed *have whereof to glory before men; but we can not before God*§; *in whoſe ſight ſhall no man living be juſtified*‖ by his own works. *Bleſſed is he, to whom faith* in Chriſt, productive of continual ſtudy to amend and improve, *is counted for Righteouſneſs*: for *to him the Lord will not impute ſin*¶.

But a ſtill worſe degree, if poſſible, of immoderate regard to our reputation is, when, to raiſe or preſerve it, we tranſgreſs our duty. And it is ſurely a ſtrange perverſeneſs in human nature, that, though fear of diſeſteem, with every other motive added to it, is frequently inſufficient to keep us from acting wrong; yet, on other occaſions, that fear alone, in oppoſition to every other motive, is abundantly ſufficient to keep us from acting right. Cuſtom and faſhion have brought ſome parts of morals, and almoſt the whole of piety, into

* Rev. iii. 1. † 1 Sam. xvi. 7. ‡ Luke xvi. 15. § Rom. iv. 2.
‖ Pſal. cxliii. 2. Rom. iii. 21. Gal. ii. 16. iii. 10. ¶ Rom. iv. 5—8.

into utter diſgrace. At leaſt too many either imprudently chuſe, or unhappily fall into ſuch acquaintance, that they muſt loſe their character with them, unleſs they will throw off their virtue and religion. No wonder if poor thoughtleſs creatures often ſink under this temptation. *But wo to thoſe, by whom the offence cometh* *: who, not content to be vicious and profane themſelves, add unprovoked the further and greater wickedneſs of perſecuting others by ridicule and invective into the ſame guilt. A perſecution, however, far from being formidable enough to afford any tolerable excuſe for ſuch as yield to it. The vain, and ſhewy, and bold, who call themſelves the world, and pretend to diſpoſe of contempt and applauſe as they will, have it not ſo entirely by any means in their own hands, as they would ſeem. For, beſides that the nature of things cannot be altered; were the number of ſuch perſons larger than it is, yet their weight is not anſwerable to it. And though the wiſe and good may, in proportion, be few; yet their judgement is, and will be reſpected by many. So that whoever is truly diſpoſed to be pious and virtuous will never want competent protection, if he doth but ſeek for it by cultivating proper friendſhips; but let the generality be ever ſo bad, will gain, upon the whole, more reputation than he loſes, by adhering to his duty.

Yet, ſuppoſing this were otherwiſe, it ſhould be conſidered, that the eſteem of the worthleſs is very ill purchaſed at the price of becoming like them: and that the moſt fatal conſequences daily proceed from perſons being led by the folly of others, rather than their own good ſenſe, and that of their diſcreeter and more experienced friends. But above all, it ſhould be conſidered, how *ſmall a thing it is to be judged of man's judgement*, when *he that judgeth us is the Lord* †: who hath expreſsly ſaid, what he will aſſuredly verify, *them that honour me, I will honour: and they that deſpiſe me ſhall be lightly eſteemed* ‡. Seldom will this fail in the preſent life: but never in the next: when *they, who ſleep in the duſt of the earth, ſhall awake; ſome to everlaſting life, and ſome to ſhame and everlaſting contempt* §. Therefore, notwithſtanding all the cenſures of this world, *let us run with patience the race that is ſet before us;*

* Matth. xviii. 7. † 1 Cor. iv. 3, 4. ‡ 1 Sam. ii. 30.
§ Dan. xii. 2.

*us; looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God**.

Another case, in which, to preserve a character with their acquaintance, persons will do what every one else, and they themselves often, see to be wrong, is that of party-wickedness. Very frequently prejudices of education, worldly interest, vehemence of temper hurry them into it. But frequently also, their sole inducement is, that if they should stop short, their friends would look coldly upon them, and think meanly of them; and they cannot bear the reproach of not having been true to their side. What a wretched principle now is this! And yet tolerably good persons will be carried strange lengths by it: and others, any lengths whatever. We find in St John, that on hearing our Saviour's discourses, *many among the chief rulers* of the Jews, inwardly *believed on him, but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the Synagogue. For they loved the praise of men, more than the praise of God*†. Now just the same thing, which got the better of their conviction in this respect, gets the better of most men's in one respect or another: and they will not reflect, that as the temptations to raise or preserve a reputation by joining in the excesses of party, are often the most trifling, and easiest to be resisted, that can be; so, when the trial is harder, the duty is still the same; but the victory will be the more honourable, and the reward the greater.

A further instance, and a very criminal one, of preferring the good opinion of others to their own conscience is, when persons, having been guilty of some folly or sin, will be guilty of almost any thing to cover it, rather than expose themselves. At one time, they will immediately commit a very great fault to conceal a very small one. At others, they will begin, for that purpose, only with what seems a pretty harmless transgression. But that doth not succeed, perhaps entangles them yet worse: and so they are drawn on, till, instead of confessing at first a single error, they are shamefully convicted at last of many. But if they could, by such means, escape ever so clear, these are not means, by which they ought to escape. Even an innocent person hath no right to use other than innocent methods

* Heb. xii. 1, 2. † John xii. 42, 43.

methods for his defence: much leſs is having done one bad thing an excuſe for doing a ſecond. So far indeed as honeſt prudence will hide our diſgrace, we are doubtleſs in the right to employ it. But if that will not ſuffice; what we have deſerved we muſt patiently undergo, as a juſt correction, and ſalutary diſcipline to produce repentance. There lies our way back: and it is in vain to ſeek for any other. If we are diſpoſed to take this only right courſe, all good perſons will think it a duty ſtrictly binding them (for indeed it is an important one) to make our return as eaſy to us, as poſſible: never to reproach us more with what we have heartily condemned ourſelves for; but hold us in that honour, of which a true penitent may ſometimes deſerve a higher degree, than thoſe who never offended. And though the world ſhould, as probably it will, do us this juſtice but imperfectly; yet bearing, in a virtuous manner, whatever ſhame our faults may bring upon us in this life, will contribute to increaſe our glory in the next.

One other bad way of aiming at reputation, which muſt be mentioned, is, when we demoliſh that of others, to raiſe our own, and build it on the ruins. Every one feels how grievous this injury is, when done to himſelf: and therefore knows the wickedneſs of doing it to his neighbour. Nor truly is the folly much leſs. Let another perſon's character in any reſpect be thought or proved ever ſo contemptible, or ſo bad, mine continues but juſt what it was. And as for any hope, that it may be the more admired, when the other is lowered; on the contrary, it will be obſerved, who hath taken pains to lower it. And they, who are known to give ſuch treatment, generally meet, as they well deſerve, with a double ſhare of it. Candour towards all, of whom we ſpeak, is the true art of obtaining it towards ourſelves; whereas *he that hath ſhewed no mercy, ſhall*, both from God and man, *have judgment without mercy* *.

But beſides thoſe, who are led into any of theſe ſins by an undue fondneſs for reputation; they alſo are blameable, who allow it to give them too much uneaſineſs. A good name is indeed the moſt valuable of all earthly things: but, like the reſt of them, may be the ſubject of too much anxiety. If we

* James ii. 13.

are not eſteemed by every body as we ought; if unjuſt imputations are thrown, and, for a time, reſt upon us, nay, ſhould it happen to be a conſiderable time: provided it be not our fault, let us make it as light a misfortune as we can. Perhaps it is for having done our duty, that we are traduced: and what is our caſe then? *Bleſſed are ye, when men ſhall revile you, and ſay all manner of evil againſt you falſely for my ſake**. Or, ſuppoſing the occaſion to be not ſo meritorious; yet it is ſome alleviation, that theſe things, in ſuch a world as the preſent, are of courſe to be expected. We live among perſons that will detract and miſinterpret: and truly we are too prone to do like them. Beſides, without any ill diſpoſition, they miſtake our attainments and accompliſhments, we miſtake theirs, and it cannot be otherwiſe. Doubtleſs we ſhould avoid both making and occaſioning ſuch miſtakes as far as we can. But, when we have done our beſt, it is no more to be hoped that the moſt excellent perſon upon earth ſhould have from all mankind a perfectly good report, than that the moſt regular perſon upon earth ſhould at all times enjoy perfectly good health. Proper care, generally ſpeaking, will ſecure us tolerably in both reſpects; at leaſt will recover us again. And, as our health may ſometimes be the better afterwards for having gone through a ſharp fit of ſickneſs: ſo may our character for ſuffering a ſevere trial. At leaſt, ſuch an exerciſe of our patience and meekneſs, if we preſerve them, will do us a great deal more ſervice, than the loſs of a little eſteem can do us harm. But it muſt be ſaid again, that let perſons only be virtuous and diſcreet, mild and humble, peaceful and charitable; that is, let them be truly good, and uſe but common precautions, that *their good be not evil ſpoken of*†; and they will ſeldom fail of ſupporting a fair reputation.

As for a high one, that is not ſo eaſy to be gained: but neither is it ſo proper to be much deſired. He indeed who is conſcious, that, were his merit known, it would enable him to be ſingularly uſeful, may and ſhould, if he is ſure that this is both true and his true motive, ſtrive earneſtly to be conſpicuous: but we are ſtrangely apt to deceive ourſelves in each of theſe points. And, if we have little more than ſelf-gratification in view: vehement ſolicitude, in moſt caſes, gives more

* Matth. v. 11. † Rom. xiv. 16.

more uneaſineſs, than ſucceſs gives pleaſure. But ſolicitude for fame hath this further unhappineſs, that, as very few have really any conſiderable title to it, moſt of the candidates for it muſt be diſappointed: and ſo much the more certainly the more forward they are in their pretenſions. For, in proportion as we betray that weakneſs, we ſtrongly tempt the world, not only to withhold the eſteem which we deſerve, but even to withdraw that which they had beſtowed upon us. And further, if perſons will affect to raiſe themſelves to a vaſt height in popular opinion, though it ſhould provoke nobody to pull their building down, it would, in all likelihood, after a while, overturn itſelf, or ſink under its own weight. Our buſineſs therefore is to take the utmoſt care, that our foundation be ſolid: but a lofty ſuperſtructure is rather to be feared than wiſhed.

And, beſides the imprudence of the thing, it is really injuſtice to demand of the world more regard than we have a right to, and charge them with what they do not owe us. Nor is even this the worſt of the caſe. Perſons, who claim too much, are frequently driven to unfair and even criminal methods of getting their claim allowed: and there are many in the world, who would have deſerved a very good name, if they had not been too earneſt and too haſty for a great one. Here then, the truly valuable reputation is loſt in purſuit of a ſhadow, which is ſeldom overtaken. To be admired is what we long for: to be diſliked and deſpiſed is what we uſually get. Or, if we ſucceed better, perhaps the paſſion, to which we make ſo coſtly a ſacrifice is only that of being celebrated for ſome errant trifle: though indeed, be it what it will, every thing is a trifle, compared to a right ſtate of mind and right conduct of life. The reputation of making theſe things our ſtudy is what we ſhould aim at: and as, in virtue, the chief point is, to do nothing ill; ſo, in character, it is to have nothing ill ſaid of us. After that, it cannot but be deſirable to have good ſaid; and, in the main, to know it. But a general and a ſlight knowledge is quite ſufficient. We may have full as much pleaſure from that, as will be of any uſe to us. And liſtening after particulars, and wanting to hear a great deal of ourſelves, both is wrong and leads wrong. They, whoſe praiſe is worth having, we may be ſure, will never give us a

large quantity of it before our faces. And therefore ſuch as do, either are bad or weak perſons themſelves, or think us ſo. At leaſt they take the ready way to make us ſo. For there is not upon earth a more enſnaring temptation, than that of too fond a ſelf-complacency. Correcting our many and great faults is our proper employment: delighting in our own praiſes and imagined excellencies, a very unſafe and pernicious one. Let it be our care then to mind our work *by* an humble and *patient continuance in well-doing:* and as to our reward, the leſs eager we are for it in this world, the more abundantly we ſhall receive, in the next, *glory, and honour, and immortality* *.

* Rom ii. 7.

SERMON

SERMON LXXXIX.

The Liberality of the Gospel Scheme, in the Contempt of Partial Distinctions.

Gal. vi. 15.

For in Chriſt Jeſus neither circumciſion availeth any thing, nor uncircumciſion, but a new creature.

THESE words relate to that firſt diſpute amongſt Chriſtians, whether the law of Moſes was ſtill to be obſerved: which, though it hath long been out of queſtion, and now perhaps the difficulty ſeems to be only, how the obſervation of ſuch a law could ever be required at all, was yet a very natural ſubject of controverſy, and plainly a very important one, when our religion began to ſpread in the world: and there is ſuch perpetual reference to it in St Paul's epiſtles, that they have been greatly miſunderſtood for want of carrying it in mind. And therefore, I ſhall, in two diſcourſes on theſe words,

I. Vindicate the juſtice and goodneſs of God in diſtinguiſhing the Jews by a peculiar covenant:

II. Give an account of the expiration of that covenant, and its ceaſing to oblige or avail any part of mankind:

III. Shew, what alone can avail men; and explain the phraſe of *a new creature*, by which the apoſtle here expreſſes it.

I. I ſhall vindicate the juſtice and goodneſs of Providence, in diſtinguiſhing the Jews, from the reſt of the world, by a peculiar covenant.

God is no reſpecter of perſons: but in every age and *nation, they who feared him and worked righteouſneſs*, have always been *accepted*

*accepted with him**. The rewards of innocence, had man continued innocent, would have extended to the whole human race: as did the ſad conſequences of our firſt parents fall. From theſe God equally relieved all their deſcendents: and received them into a ſecond covenant of grace and forgiveneſs, on the equitable terms of a ſincere, though imperfect obedience, having for its principle, the belief more or leſs explicit, in proportion as revelation was, that *he is, and is a rewarder of them that ſeek him*†. This faith ſaved *Noah, the preacher* and practiſer of *righteouſneſs*‡, with his family, when *all fleſh* beſides, having *corrupted their way*§, were deſtroyed by the deluge: that, after ſo exemplary a puniſhment of ſin, the world might begin anew from that good man, with better hopes of their obſerving for the future the laws of the Almighty. Again, to all the deſcendents of Noah, without exception, God equally delivered his precepts and his promiſes: nor made any diſtinction amongſt them, till they had made one amongſt themſelves, by revolting in great numbers from true religion to idolatry and wickedneſs. And then, as he had enabled them to *ſee* originally, *from the things that were made, his eternal power and Godhead* ‖; as he had formed them to *be a law to themſelves* ¶, by the authority of natural conſcience within them; as he had ſuperadded ſuch ſtrong manifeſtations of his acceptance of piety and virtue, and his abhorrence of Sin; what ground could there have been for complaint, if he had left them to obſerve, or neglect at their peril, the notices already given them; without interpoſing any farther to direct them in this world; only reſerving for the next ſuch rewards or puniſhments, as were ſuitable to their behaviour? And yet there is reaſon to think, from occaſional intimations in ſcripture, that warnings and inſtructions from heaven were ſtill frequently vouchſafed to mankind.

But one man in particular, Abraham, and his deſcendents, God was pleaſed to bleſs, beyond others, with communications of his will; and admit into a covenant of peculiar favour: which to many hath appeared a preference very partial, and unkind to the reſt of the world. But would it have been kinder to beſtow this favour on none, than on ſome? The reſt of the

* Acts x. 34, 35. † Heb. xi. 6. ‡ 2 Pet. ii. 5. § Gen. vi. 12.
‖ Rom. i. 20 ¶ Rom. ii. 14.

the world were in a worſe condition than before, though the Jews were in a better. God did not abandon the general care of mankind, when he took that people into his more eſpecial protection. The other nations of the earth had ſtill a right to all the old promiſes of mercy, though the Jews had new ones given them. Accordingly we find, after the call of Abraham, Melchizedek, a Gentile, not only an acceptable worſhipper himſelf, but a Prieſt to others *of the moſt high God**: and ſuch a one, whoſe prieſthood more fully reſembled our bleſſed Lord's, than that of Aaron did. Again, we find that holy man Job, though a Gentile alſo, fully equal in God's eſteem to any of thoſe, who were diſtinguiſhed for his choſen people, by the marks of his covenant.

Still, if, upon this, we are aſked the queſtion, which the apoſtle ſuppoſes to be put, *What advantage then had the Jew?* We anſwer with him: *much every way: chiefly, becauſe that unto them were committed the oracles of God* †. From the very time of Abraham's call, he and his poſterity had fuller notifications of God's will, and ſtronger inſtances of his providential care, than other men. But from the time, when Moſes appeared amongſt them, they had unheard-of demonſtrations of divine power, exerting itſelf for their deliverance and protection; and a viſible appearance of the divine glory, leading them from the land of bondage to that of promiſe. They had a law delivered to them, with inexpreſſible ſolemnity, by the mouth of God himſelf: and though it may ſeem hard to account for ſome part of it, eſpecially to the unlearned, at the preſent diſtance of above three thouſand years; yet, ſo far as we have the means of judging, it even now ſhews itſelf, on the whole, admirably fitted, in their circumſtances, to preſerve them from the idolatry and immoralities of their neighbours, and eſtabliſh amongſt them the belief and practice of true religion: to convince them of their inability of fulfilling a perfect obedience, and therefore their need of God's mercy; to prefigure, by the appointment of a ceremonial ſervice, a ſpiritual one to come; and by the inſtitution of typical ſacrifice to be offered daily, the true and efficacious ſacrifice and Prieſthood of that perſon, through whom pardon and grace were derived to mankind. Then, beſides the eſtabliſhment of ſuch a law

* Gen. xiv. 18. † Rom. iii. 1, 2.

law amongſt them, God was perpetually exciting them to good, and deterring them from evil; by the interpoſition of an extraordinary providence, to reward their obedience, or puniſh their diſobedience; and by the warnings, and exhortations of prophets, raiſed up ſucceſſively; who alſo both explained and improved the inſtructions, which Moſes had given them.

Theſe were doubtleſs great advantages: but that other nations had not the ſame, is no more an objection againſt the divine juſtice and goodneſs, than that all nations or all men at preſent have not in all reſpects the ſame advantages, that ſome have. It ſuffices, that of each ſhall be required *according to what he hath, not according to what he hath not* *. But as to every thing beyond this, God is maſter of his own gifts: and we are incompetent judges, how he ought to diſpoſe of them. Yet, in the diſpoſal of which I am ſpeaking, we may trace evident footſteps of wiſdom, and extenſive mercy. While the reſt of the world was falling into ſuperſtition and idolatry, Abraham diſtinguiſhed himſelf by a faithful practice of true religion: and therefore was properly a diſtinguiſhed object of divine favour. He was careful alſo to educate his family in the ſame principles; as God himſelf bears him witneſs. *For I know Abraham; that he will command his children and his houſehold after him, and they ſhall keep the way of the Lord, to do juſtice and judgment* †. It was therefore no groundleſs preference, but a moſt reaſonable proceeding; to build on the foundations already laid and remaining; and reward perſons, found to be ſo well diſpoſed, by conferring on them farther privileges; of which, with all their faults, they were much likelier to make a good uſe, than any of their more corrupted neighbours.

Yet to theſe likewiſe, and to all men, God had gracious intentions in every thing, which he did for his peculiar people. One of the firſt promiſes made to Abraham was, that *in him and in his ſeed ſhould all the nations of the earth be bleſſed* ‡. This indeed received not its full accompliſhment, till our

* 2 Cor. viii. 12. † Gen. xviii. 19.

‡ Gen. xii. 4. xviii. 18. xxii. 18.

our Saviour, the great bleſſing of all nations, came. But it was in ſome meaſure verifying continually, from the day it was made. Had all men been left to themſelves at that time, the knowledge of true religion might have been every where loſt. But ſecuring the profeſſion of it amongſt the deſcendents of *Abraham*, was preſerving a witneſs for God upon earth, and that in a part of it, perhaps as well peopled and as well eſteemed, as any then known. There they *ſhone* forth, firſt in *Canaan*, then in *Egypt*, *as lights in a dark place* *, to attract the eyes and direct the ſteps of the well-diſpoſed. And this is a benefit of great conſequence. For truth propoſed is much more eaſily perceived, than without ſuch propoſal it is diſcovered. And when the Almighty brought them back from *Egypt* to *Canaan* again, by ſuch amazing miracles as the ſcripture relates, theſe were ſo many loud declarations from heaven to mankind, concerning their duty: nor have we reaſon to doubt, but many were alarmed and convinced by their means: which indeed is expreſsly mentioned, as one end propoſed by them: *And the Egyptians ſhall know that I am the Lord* †. Accordingly there *went out*, we read, *a mixed multitude with* ‡ the *Iſraelites*: and who could they be, but ſuch as were brought to believe in the true God? For worſhippers of falſe gods they were not to ſuffer amongſt them. Again, ſoon after this, *Jethro*, a man of high rank, and therefore probably of great influence, amongſt the *Midianites*; how ſtrongly doth he declare, what effect theſe wonders had on him? *And Jethro ſaid, Bleſſed be the Lord who hath delivered you out of the hands of the Egyptians—Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods* §. Further ſtill: where-ever we find in the Law, as we do very frequently, mention of the *ſtrangers, that ſhould ſojourn in the land of Iſrael*; theſe were many of them indeed no proſelytes to the whole of the Jewiſh covenant, but all of them worſhippers of the Maker of heaven and earth only. And though, by the wiſe direction of God, *Moſes* prohibited the admiſſion of idolaters amongſt the people; yet by the ſame direction he enjoined the utmoſt humanity and tenderneſs to all, that preſerved the religion of the children of *Noah*, or of nature, in any tolerable degree uncorrupted. In the ſame ſpirit, *Solomon* too puts up an earneſt petition for ſuch, in his prayer

* 2 Pet. i. 19. † Exod. vii. 5. § Exii. xii. 38. ‖ Exod. xviii. 10, 11.

at the dedication of the temple: *Moreover concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country, for thy name's sake: (for they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm:) when he shall come, and pray toward this house; hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all the people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as do thy people Israel.**

Nor were the Jews of service only in their flourishing state, to support true religion in the world: but under their afflictions and captivities they spread it much further, than they could before. Whilst they were their own masters in their own land, the peculiar institutions of their law considerably lessened the freedom of their intercourse with strangers. And these restraints, though extremely necessary, as it very plainly appeared, to preserve the purity of their religion, were otherwise great hindrances to the propagation of it. But when they were led captive into the lands of their enemies, and the punishment of their sins had given them a steadier zeal for their duty; then they became extensively useful to the nations, amongst whom necessity mixed them; as both the reasonableness of their faith, compared with heathenism, was easy to be seen; and as prophecies fulfilled, or miracles performed in their favour, could not but recommend the worship of that Being, whom they served. By these means, their conqueror Nebuchadnezzar was brought to declare him, *God of gods, and Lord of kings, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment* †. On these accounts did Darius the Mede decree, *that in every dominion of his kingdom, men should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and stedfast for ever* ‡. And Cyrus, whom Isaiah had foretold by name, above 100 years before his birth, for the restoring of the people from their captivity, acknowledged by a written proclamation, sent through his whole empire, that the God of the Jews had *given him all the kingdoms of the earth* §.

Nor is there sufficient ground to think, that these notions of true religion were soon lost again. On the contrary, from them proceeded very probably the great reformation made in the

* 1 Kings viii. 41,—43. † Dan. ii. 47. iv. 37. ‡ Dan. vi. 26.
§ Ezra. i. 1, 2.

the notions of the eaſtern part of the world, by Zoroaſter: whoſe doctrine and form of worſhip, was the pureſt that the heathen knew. And many have apprehended, not without ſpecious appearances of reaſon, that almoſt all the whole kingdom of God, which the Greek philoſophers had, was derived to them, ultimately, if not immediately, from the revelations made to the Jews. But however that might be; it is certain, that after the time of Alexander, this nation was diffuſed wider through the world; and, in every city which they inhabited, erected ſynagogues for divine worſhip, and for reading and explaining the holy ſcriptures; to which reſorted, as we find in the New Teſtament, many devout perſons amongſt the Gentiles, who had learned from the Jews to fear God. And thus, as Iſaiah foretold, did the *law go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jeruſalem**, conveying ſuch degrees of light to all nations around, as prepared them to receive *the Sun of righteouſneſs*, when in the fulneſs of time he *aroſe, with healing in his wings* †.

But though they were inſtruments of good to the world, they fell at length themſelves into pernicious errors. Being diſtinguiſhed by the obſervances of their law from other nations, they grew ſo wrongly vain of thoſe diſtinctions, which in reality were mortifying proofs of their unfitneſs to be truſted without reſtraints, that they placed all the value of their religion in the outworks of it; and deſpiſed and hated the reſt of mankind, whom this ſeparation of theirs was intended to inſtruct and ſerve. Again, having promiſes made to them of a prince of the houſe of David, whom all people were to obey, they abſurdly imagined, notwithſtanding many evidences in their own ſcriptures to the contrary, that this was to be, not a ſpiritual kingdom, influencing mens hearts, and protecting them from ſin, and rewarding them with eternal happineſs; but a temporal one, like thoſe of this world, the honours and profits of which they ſhould ſhare, and tyrannize over the earth. So that when their expected Meſſiah came, finding him not to anſwer theſe vain and wicked hopes, they rejected and *crucified the Lord of glory* ‡. Thus then did the Jews, after *preaching* for ſo many ages *to others*, become themſelves *caſt-aways* §: and have continued ever ſince under viſible

* Iſa. ii. 3. † Mal. iv. 2. ‡ 1 Cor. ii. 8. § 1 Cor. ix. 27.

marks of divine displeasure. Yet they perform to this day the office, to which they were at first appointed; of bearing witness to true religion: being preserved a distinct people, though dispersed through the world, for so long a time; as no one besides from the creation ever was in like circumstances; and demonstrating all the while the uncorruptness of their books, in which both they and we believe, and from which, in a great measure, we prove the truth of our religion, against themselves, as well as other infidels. Nor is this the whole service, of the same kind, to which they are destined. For in God's good time, they shall give a new and illustrious, (and who knows how seasonable?) attestation to Christianity, by their conversion; and the *receiving of them* again into the church shall be as *life from the dead* *. For so their own prophets have foretold, that God *will pour on them the Spirit of grace and of supplications; and they shall look upon him whom they have pierced, and shall mourn: and in that day shall be a fountain opened to them for sin and for uncleanness: they shall call on his name, and he will hear them: He will say, it is my people; and they shall say, the Lord is my God* †.

Thus I have given you, I hope, a sufficient vindication of the divine justice and goodness, in distinguishing the Jews by a peculiar covenant. And now I proceed,

II. To speak concerning the expiration of that covenant, and its ceasing to oblige or avail any part of mankind. You will naturally understand me to mean, that such things only ceased, as were peculiar to the Mosaic dispensation: whether ceremonies in religion, or methods of proceeding in civil government. For what all men were bound to, before the law of Moses, they were certainly bound to, afterwards. And wherever that law was merely an explanation of the law of nature, the explanation was a just and authorised one, and ought to be followed by as many, as come to the knowledge of it.

But the Jewish converts to Christianity, who were the first it had, and, though not the majority of that people, yet a large number, were inclined to carry the matter much further than this. They were indeed humble and reasonable enough to receive Jesus for the Messiah: but still they were proud enough

* Rom xi. 15. † Zech. xii. 10. xiii 1, 9.

nough to think, that he was ſent only to themſelves. Accordingly the apoſtles for ſome time preached the goſpel to none, but their own nation. And when St Peter was ſatisfied, by a viſion from heaven, of the duty of doing otherwiſe, they that were of the circumciſion blamed him for what he had done: till, having an account laid before them of the authority he went upon, *they held their peace, and glorified God: ſaying, Then hath God alſo to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life* *. But when this difficulty was over, another very great one was immediately ſtarted; whether he had granted it on any other terms, than their obſerving the Jewiſh law: on which point was held a council at Jeruſalem, as you may read, Acts xv. where, after the matter had been thoroughly debated, the apoſtles, elders, and brethren, directed by the Holy Ghoſt, unanimouſly determined, that ſince the Jews had never been able to keep their own law in ſtrictneſs; and therefore could not themſelves be ſaved, but through the grace of the Lord Jeſus Chriſt; and ſince the Gentiles, without the law, had not only been purified by the ſame faith, but had received the ſame gifts of the Holy Ghoſt, with the Jews; this was evidence enough, that they were accepted in their preſent condition, as the prophets had intimated they ſhould: and therefore it was needleſs and unjuſt to lay a new yoke upon them, which they had never been enjoined before to undertake, nor would be able to bear now.

But even after this, one doubt remained ſtill, whether the Jews at leaſt ought not to continue obſerving their own law: For it had been declared in the Old Teſtament an ordinance to endure *for ever* †. And our Saviour himſelf had not only, purſuant to its direction, been circumciſed in his infancy, but throughout his life was obedient to every precept of the Moſaic covenant: and therefore it might ſeem requiſite, that all his diſciples of that nation ſhould be ſo too. Now contradicting this notion immediately and openly, muſt, conſidering how fond the Jews were of their religious ceremonies, have proved a great hindrance to their embracing the faith of Chriſt. And therefore he did not appriſe his very apoſtles clearly at firſt of his whole intention, as to theſe matters; but told them, that *he had many things to ſay unto them, which then they could not*

* Acts xi. 1—18. † Exod. xii. 14, &c.

not bear; but that when the Spirit of truth should come, he would guide them into all truth *. And after they were more fully inſtructed, they exerciſed great prudence and patience towards their countrymen: permitting, and even practiſing along with them, for a while, what they knew to be neceſſary; and gently looſening their deeply-rooted prejudices. For, when examined with care, they will evidently appear to be nothing more than prejudices. The phraſe, *for ever*, uſed concerning the continuance of the law, is uſed in that law itſelf concerning very ſmall periods of time; the term of a man's life, the term of fifty years and leſs: in ſhort, it means no more, than this; that what is appointed, ſhall be done, ſo long as the ſtate of things, to which the appointment refers, ſhall laſt. And therefore, notwithſtanding ſuch words; when circumſtances viſibly alter, God may as juſtly and as wiſely repeal any of his laws, as men do many of theirs, into which the ſame and the words, have been inſerted. Now the coming of Chriſt made a moſt evident and material alteration. It was indeed very fit, that to ſhew himſelf perfectly obedient, and prevent all poſſibility of cavil againſt him on that head, he ſhould fulfil the whole righteouſneſs of the covenant, under which he was born. But when he had exhibited the ſubſtance of thoſe good things, of which the legal ceremonies were ſhadows; and compleated all that the Moſaic diſpenſation prefigured, one great end of its exiſtence plainly ceaſed. When men were grown capable, as God ſaw they were by that time of a freer, and more ſpiritual, and manly ſervice, inſtead of thoſe formal reſtraints to keep them from going wrong, and thoſe outward carnal ordinances to ſtrike their imaginations, under which they had been placed in the earlier ages, compared by the apoſtle to a ſtate of childhood †: then a ſecond deſign of the law ceaſed. And when the time came, in which God judged it proper, that the Jews, who had been diſtinguiſhed from the Gentiles, to preſerve true religion in the world for their common benefit, ſhould be reunited to them, that they might practiſe it together, and *be one fold under one ſhepherd* then the third end of the law ceaſed; and *breaking down the wall of partition* ‡, that is, taking away the ceremonies that ſeparated them, contributed much, not only to the uniformity and beau-

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* John xvi. 12, 13. † Gal. iv. 1, &c. ‡ Eph. ii. 14.

ty of Chriſtianity, but to the preſervation of harmony and love, and the avoidance of jealouſy and complaint, amongſt its profeſſors; beſides, that indeed many of the inſtitutions of Moſes were calculated for the uſe only of one ſmall nation, as that nation, to which he preſcribed them, was; and neither could poſſibly be obſerved by all mankind, nor can be obſerved by the Jews in their preſent diſperſion.

Yet, weighty as theſe conſiderations were, many continued unmoved by them: and inſiſted, that all men muſt keep the Jewiſh law; for that, without it, faith in Chriſt would not ſave them. And this is the doctrine, which St. *Paul* in his epiſtles ſo zealouſly confutes, as diſhonourable to, and inconſiſtent with, the goſpel. He there ſhews, that Jews, as well as Gentiles, are ſinners; and, far from meriting future happineſs by their good deeds, can eſcape future puniſhment for their bad ones only through God's mercy, which Chriſt hath procured for them, and revealed to them: that the law of *Moſes* requires perfect obedience; and after diſobedience, makes no proviſion for pardon, but through him, whom its ſacrifices preſignify: that therefore, if they ſought for juſtification by their legal works, as they appeared to do, they could not be juſtified at all; and, if they ſought it by the grace of Chriſt, that ſingly would be ſufficient: and it was doing it a groſs injury to imagine, that when the ſubſtance was come, the aſſiſtance of the ſhadow was requiſite, to make it effectual: that *faith had* not only ſaved the earlier patriarchs, but even *been imputed to Abraham*, the father of the Jews themſelves, *for righteouſneſs* *, and a promiſe had been made him, that *in his ſeed ſhould all nations be bleſſed*, before the very firſt part of the law, circumciſion, was appointed; and hundreds of years before the reſt of it had a being: and therefore the ſame faith, only rendered more explicit, might well have the ſame effect, after the law was taken away: which now only obſcured the building, it had helped to raiſe.

Theſe things make the principal ſubject of ſome of his epiſtles, particularly that to the *Romans*, and this to the *Galatians*; throughout the reſt he frequently alludes to them: and bearing them in mind, is carrying along with us the true key to underſtand his writings; and reconcile him with St *James*,

* Rom. iv. 3. 22. 23.

James, when the former faith, that *men are juſtified by faith, without the deeds of the law* *, and the latter, that *by works a man is juſtified, and not by faith only* †. St Paul means, that believers in Chriſt will be ſaved without the obſervance of the Moſaic law, or the perfect obſervance of the natural law, to which our ſinful natures cannot attain: and St James means, that believers in Chriſt will not be ſaved, by their faith ſingly, without a ſincere, though imperfect, obſervance of the precepts of the goſpel. For, it ſeems, there were ſome of wrong minds, who fell into an error, which indeed none of right diſpoſitions could: and hearing the apoſtles ſay, that men were *not under the law, but under grace* ‡, and that *Chriſt hath made us free* § from what the Jews were bound to; either imagined or pretended, that their Chriſtian liberty exempted them from all law, and even from that of the civil magiſtrate. This, you ſee, was a moſt pernicious opinion. And not only St James declared againſt it, and St Peter too in his epiſtle, but St Paul is very expreſs, that though, with reſpect to the Moſaic rites, Chriſtians are without law, yet are they *not without law* in regard *to God, but under the law to Chriſt* ||, and, by his command, under that of men alſo.

This then is the doctrine of the New Teſtament; that according to the tenor of the goſpel, neither the obſervance of the Moſaic law will juſtify men, nor the non-obſervance of it condemn them; but that a thorough change of heart and life from evil to good, effected by the power of God's almighty grace, is the one thing needful: *for in Chriſt Jeſus, neither circumciſion availeth any thing, nor uncircumciſion: but a new creature.* Now we, in the preſent age, are ſo entirely ſatisfied about the former of theſe points, that perhaps we think it loſt time to hear any thing ſaid upon it; though a way is thus opened, both to underſtand the ſenſe, and vindicate the pertinence, of a conſiderable part of the New Teſtament: and likewiſe to convince reaſonable perſons, that other difficult paſſages of holy writ, if we knew the circumſtances to which they refer, might appear equally plain and unexceptionable. But then we are ſtrangely apt, if not to diſbelieve, yet to miſunderſtand the latter part of the apoſtle's aſſertion in the text: and

* Rom. iii. 28. † James ii. 24. ‡ Rom. vi. 14. § Gal. v. 1.
|| 1 Cor. ix. 21.

and sometimes, it may be, to think more implied in it, but often less, than really is. And, by such mistakes, we come to rest our salvation on things, that will avail us little more than the observances of the Jews would them. Thus in almost the same manner, that they over-valued that ceremony, which was the entrance into their covenant, we over-value our baptism, which is the entrance into ours; and think well of our spiritual state, merely because a solemn promise was made in our names, of which we have lived in the breach almost ever since. Or if we can plead something more; perhaps it is a formal attendance on prayers, and sermons, and sacraments, without attention and without meaning: or it is the orthodoxy of a belief, that hath no influence on our practice; or the fervency of a zeal without knowledge, or without charity: it is our fits of repentance, and no amendment: our transitory warmth of good affections and fruitless purposes: our partial obedience to some precepts of God's law, with a gross neglect of others: or our imagined obedience to all, with a conceit of our own righteousness and merit that destroys all: these are the things on which multitudes rely; whereas, nothing can secure us from final condemnation, but that which the apostle calls *a new creature*; and which, God willing, shall be further explained to you the next opportunity. But, in the mean time, as we must all be sensible, that we want something, and most of us, it may be feared, a great deal, of being such creatures as we ought; why should we postpone our reformation or improvement one hour longer? So many years have already passed over our heads; and what hath been done in them towards preparing for eternity? If enough to be accepted, let us thank God, and go on our way rejoicing, whatever our condition be in other respects; and press forward, with redoubled earnestness, to obtain a double reward. If we have cause to doubt our state, there can be no doubt so important for us to clear up instantly. And if it be a bad one; if we have lived in the commission of sins, the neglect of duties, the wilful neglect of any one duty; what a prospect have we before us, and what need to change it? Let us think of ourselves as well as we can; are we content, that death and judgement should overtake us just such as we are? or have we not every one something to do, before we are ready?

And if so, when shall it be done? Not a moment, beyond the present, are we sure of: and why should the one thing needful be deferred till the next? Delays are nothing but cheats, that we put upon our souls: and never, I believe, did any one's resolution of amendment hold good, who did not resolve to amend immediately. If then you meant it at all: *now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation* *. And may God, who now calls upon you by me, grant, that *in this our day we may all know the things that belong to our peace*, lest they be for ever *hid from our eyes* †.

* 2 Cor. vi. 2. † Luke xix. 42.

SERMON

SERMON XC.

The Liberality of the Gospel Scheme, in the Contempt of Partial Distinctions.

Gal. vi. 15.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

IN discoursing on these words you may remember I proposed,

I. To vindicate the justice and goodness of God in distinguishing the Jews by a peculiar covenant:

II. To give an account of the expiration of that covenant, and its ceasing to oblige or avail any part of mankind:

III. To shew, what alone can avail men: explaining for that purpose, the phrase of *a new creature*, by which the apostle here describes it.

I have finished the two first of these heads; and shall proceed, without any repetition, to the third: a point the more worthy of your careful attention, both as the subject itself is of the utmost importance, and as the figurative expressions used in relation to it, here and elsewhere in scripture, are not only despised and ridiculed by the profane, as unintelligible or extravagant; but, through inconsiderateness or prejudice, too commonly misunderstood by the serious; who from thence fall into notions, which, if they are not rectified, may greatly affect, often their present peace, and sometimes their future happiness.

To explain the new creation, it will be requisite to begin

with the old. *God created man in his own image* *, holy and pure: and unqueſtionably furniſhed him with ſufficient powers and motives to continue ſuch. But by his miſerable fall he became prone to ſin, as well as mortal. His primitive uprightneſs and ſtrength of mind, were, by that pernicious indulgence, depraved and weakened: his affections and appetites grew irregular; and his own *corruptible body preſſed down his ſoul* †. The unhappy diſorders, which he had thus introduced into his own frame, he muſt of conſequence tranſmit, as an hereditary diſeaſe, to his poſterity: and accordingly, in fact, a tendency to evil, and inability of doing good, is experienced, more or leſs, by every one that comes into the world. Then as men grow up, inſtead of correcting their bad inclinations, they never fail to cheriſh them, if left to their own ways: by which means they become worſe of courſe; generally ſo much worſe, that the nature, which they received at their conception, may be accounted virtuous and good, in compariſon with that ſecond nature, which by evil habits they form to themſelves. And thus doubly changed, by original defilement and actual tranſgreſſion, far from continuing to be the creatures which God firſt made, and preſerving that likeneſs to their heavenly Father, which would give them the title of his ſons, they are juſtly called in ſcripture the *children of the devil* ‡, and therefore the *children of wrath* §.

The divine goodneſs, however, was deſirous to relieve mankind from the ill effects, not only of Adam's ſin but their own: and the divine wiſdom provided a method of doing it, conſiſtent with the honour of God's government, through the interpoſition of our bleſſed Redeemer: which method, from the beginning, was intimated to men ſufficiently, though obſcurely; and afterwards by degrees more explicitly unfolded. But that he ſhould be reconciled to ſinners, wilfully remaining ſuch, was quite impoſſible. And therefore, together with a proviſion of mercy on his part, there muſt alſo be a proviſion of amendment on the part of the offenders: and in theſe two things, inſeparably united, the reſtoration of the human race to a ſtate of happineſs muſt conſiſt. Accordingly we find them cloſely joined, not only in the more direct and formal declarations

* Gen. i. 27. † Wiſd. ix. 15. ‡ 1 John iii. 10
§ Eph ii. 3.

tions of ſcripture concerning this momentous change, but in all the various images, under which it is repreſented.

Sometimes it is expreſſed by *adoption:* becauſe that implies our being aliens and ſtrangers, received into God's family and inheritance: but then it implies alſo an obligation to obey him, as dutiful ſons. Elſewhere, by a ſtronger figure, it is called a *regeneration*, or, which means the ſame, a *new birth;* becauſe it brings perſons forth into a new ſtate of things, where they are to act from other principles than they did before, or would have done elſe, in another manner, with other expectations, and grow up to the maturity of another character. In ſome places again, the ſame happy change is deſcribed, as a *reſurrection from the dead:* becauſe it raiſes and reſtores men, both to the activity of a ſpiritual life now, and to the well-grounded hopes of eternal life hereafter. But the moſt emphatical phraſe of all is that in the text, of *a new creature*, or creation. The inward condition of man, under the full effects of his firſt parents tranſgreſſion, anſwers too exactly, and yet more after the addition of his own perſonal guilt, to that account in the beginning of the hiſtory of the old creation: *And the earth was without form and void, and darkneſs was upon the face of the deep**. But it follows: *And God ſaid, let there be light, and there was light* †. Thus the human ſoul, in the above-mentioned ſtate, is unformed and diſorderly, void of reaſon and rule, gloomy and comfortleſs; till *God, who commanded the light to ſhine out of darkneſs* ‡, ſhine upon the diſmal chaos, and produce in it new appearances and views of things; till he bring forth order from confuſion, and form again in the heart the illuminating image of his own holy nature.

But here it muſt be obſerved, that, in ſome ſenſe and degree, the ſcripture expreſſions and privileges of a new birth and creation belong to all, who are admitted by baptiſm into the Chriſtian covenant, though none are intitled to future happineſs by them, but ſuch as complete their right to them, if God allows them time for it, by performing, from a ſpirit of inward piety, the ſeveral obligations of the goſpel. When that is preached to Jews or Heathens, every one who believes and is baptized, is *buried with Chriſt* in that ſacred ordinance, *raiſed*

* Gen. i. 2. † Verſe 3. ‡ 2 Cor. iv. 6.

raiſed up to newneſs of life *, and adopted of God for his child. When the infants of believers are baptized, they are, by the ſolemnity which heaven hath appointed, *born again of water and the Spirit* †, into a better ſtate, than that of nature. And till either ſort of perſons forfeit their claim by wilful wickedneſs; which it may be hoped ſome never do, though *in many things we offend all* ‡, they continue heirs of everlaſting life. And even when they fall under the dominion of ſin; though, were they to die in that condition, future miſery would be their portion; and therefore, in reſpect of any preſent title to their heavenly Father's inheritance, they are no longer children of God: as earthly ſons or ſubjects, when they rebel, are no longer ſuch, in reſpect of any right to the favour of their parents or princes: yet as, in other regards, theſe latter continue ſons and ſubjects ſtill; ſo the covenant with the former, by which they were made the children of God, ſubſiſts, notwithſtanding their failure of duty, thus far, that not only by the terms of it, if they perſiſt, they will be condemned, but by the terms of it alſo, if they repent, they will be pardoned. And neither the penitence, nor the forgiveneſs, of thoſe, who before were initiated into Chriſtianity, and have not ſince rejected it, is ever expreſſed in the word of God by the phraſe of the new birth or new creature, but theſe are appropriated almoſt, if not altogether, to our original admiſſion into the goſpel ſtate; into which we enter once for all, by one baptiſm, *the laver of regeneration.* Nicodemus, to whom our Saviour, in St John, gives inſtructions on that head, was not then become a Chriſtian. The *Galatians, of whom* St Paul ſaith *he travaileth in birth again, until Chriſt be formed in them* §, either had apoſtatized from the faith intirely, or wanted, not the whole, but the completion only of the new birth, by juſter and fuller conceptions of the goſpel doctrine. Nor is there the leaſt appearance elſewhere in the New Teſtament, of telling any profeſſed believer, though he had ſinned ever ſo grievouſly, that he muſt be born again; (otherwiſe the ſame perſon would be born again as often as he falls into any great wickedneſs, and recovers from it:) but that he

* Rom. vi. 4. † John iii. 5. ‡ James iii. 2. § Gal. iv. 19.

he muſt *repent, and do the firſt works**, and *be renewed in the ſpirit of his mind*†; which belongs, in its degree, to the beſt of good Chriſtians. And therefore, though inculcating perpetually, that *without holineſs no man ſhall ſee the Lord*‡, is indiſpenſably needful; yet reaching the neceſſity of being regenerated, as a thing ſtill abſolutely wanting, to a great part of thoſe who call themſelves diſciples of Chriſt, is uſing a language, not conformable to that of ſcripture, nor indeed of the primitive fathers, or the offices of our own liturgy: which declares every perſon, who is baptized, to be, by that very act, *regenerate, and grafted into the body of Chriſt's church.* It is true, a different manner of ſpeaking may be capable of a good interpretation, and ſhould be interpreted as favourably as there is room. But it is neither accurate, nor prudent, to depart from the authoriſed ſenſe of the words of *ſound doctrine*: and much leſs is it allowable to blame others for adhering to them.

The firſt and immediate meaning then of the apoſtle in the text, we have cauſe to think, is, that under the Goſpel, neither entering into the Moſaic covenant by the appointed form will do a man ſervice, nor the want of it do him harm: and that being received, by baptiſm, into a new ſtate of grace and mercy, is equally, neceſſary and equally ſufficient, for Jew and Gentile. But then, being admitted even into this ſtate will avail us nothing finally, unleſs we live ſuitably to the laws of it. And as, in the natural world, God's preſervation of things hath often been called a continual creation of them: ſo in the moral, the ſame notion is more evidently right. The complete ſenſe therefore of the goſpel creation comprehends, not only the giving of ſpiritual life at firſt, but ſupporting it in us afterwards. And we ſhall find the whole of our religious being, as well as the beginning of it, to deſerve the name of the new creature on two accounts;

I. Of the power of God neceſſary to it.

II. Of the change in man's condition made by it.

I. Of the power of God, neceſſary to it. Now this power he hath exerted, not only by giving us originally the light of reaſon and conſcience, and ſuperadding to this the directions and motives of external revelation; but by inwardly operating

* Rev. ii. 5. † Eph. iv. 23. ‡ Heb. xii 14.

ting on our hearts through his Spirit, exciting and forming us to piety and virtue, and reſtraining us from tranſgreſſion, in ſuch a manner, that whatever good we perform, and whatever evil we avoid, not we by our own ſtrength do it, *but the grace of God, which is with us* * : *by grace we are ſaved, through faith, and that not of ourſelves; it is the gift of God* † : *for we are his workmanſhip, created in Chriſt Jeſus, unto good works* ‡. This Doctrine the ſcripture throughout teaches. We know not indeed, how God influences our minds: for we know not how he doth any thing. But aſſiſting his fallen and weak creatures is ſo worthy of him; and the belief of that aſſiſtance is ſo productive of thankfulneſs and love, humility and pious reſolution; that ſurely we muſt admit it on his plain teſtimony and we can hardly lay too great a ſtreſs upon it, provided we are careful not to pervert it, either into a plea for our own negligence, or an imputation upon his juſtice.

If we imagine ourſelves abſolutely incapable of doing any thing towards our reformation from ſin, or improvement in goodneſs; we excuſe thoſe who become and continue wicked, as having no means given them to act otherwiſe; we charge their guilt upon God, for with-holding ſuch means from them; and make it unjuſt in him to puniſh them for the worſt things they do. For no puniſhment is juſt, where there is no fault: and it can be no fault to behave, as we never could help behaving. Beſides, all the commands and exhortations of ſcripture, all its earneſt reaſonings and affectionate expoſtulations, have for their ground-work the ſuppoſition, that man is able, as he chuſes, either to receive *the grace of God, which bringeth ſalvation* §, or, generally ſpeaking, to reject it. We own, the ſpiritual creation, as well as the natural, is in appearance wholly aſcribed to God in ſome places of holy writ: But, in appearance alſo, wholly aſcribed to man in others: as, *make you a new heart, and a new ſpirit: for why will ye die, O houſe of Iſrael* ‖. And we are to underſtand the various texts of ſcripture conſiſtently: not to ſtretch figurative expreſſions, till we force them to contradict literal ones, and evident reaſon too. Elſe, if we conclude, that becauſe the wicked are deſcribed as *dead in ſins* ¶, they can take no ſtep towards good; we muſt conclude

* 1 Cor. xv. 10. † Eph ii. 8. ‡ Verſe 10.
§ Tit. ii. 11. ‖ Ezek. xviii. 31. ¶ Eph. ii. 1.

conclude alſo, that becauſe the religious and virtuous are deſcribed as *dead to ſin* *, they can take no ſtep towards evil: which the very beſt of us all knows to be falſe. And likewiſe, if we argue thus, we muſt condemn or miſinterpret many clear paſſages of the New Teſtament beſides: particularly that of St Paul, *awake, thou that ſleepeſt, and ariſe from the dead, and Chriſt ſhall give thee light* †. Still we readily grant, that nothing of this can be done otherwiſe, than by the ſtrength which God furniſhes: but he furniſhes to every one, that hears the goſpel, ſtrength ſufficient. The true ſcripture doctrine therefore is, that divine grace enables and excites men to do their duty: that ſome wilfully refuſe to be guided by it, and fall; while others concur with it, and *work out their own ſalvation, God working in them both to will and to do* ‡. But,

II. Our Chriſtian life is alſo called a new creation, to expreſs in a ſtrong manner, how greatly our condition is changed by it for the better: according to that of the apoſtle, *If any man be in Chriſt, he is a new creature: old things are paſſed away, behold all things are become new* §. But here again, we muſt guard againſt miſtakes.

It is not true, that, in ſtrictneſs of ſpeech, fallen man hath originally no principle of what is right left in him. If the whole was loſt by the fall, ſomewhat hath by the general grace of God been reſtored ſince. For, though St Paul ſaith, *In me, that is, in my fleſh, dwelleth no good thing* ||, yet he ſaith of the ſame perſon, quickly after, *I delight in the law of God after the inward man* ¶. And he ſuppoſes even *the Gentiles* to *do*, in ſome caſes, to ſome degree, *the things contained in the law* *. Indeed experience proves, that notorious ſinners have often a conſiderable mixture of worthy diſpoſitions. We are not therefore to look on thoſe dreadful pictures, which the ſacred writers draw, of the moſt depraved of the heathen, as being juſt repreſentations, without abatement, of the natural ſtate of all mankind. But however, that ſtate is undoubtedly a bad one; deſtitute of ſufficient ſtrength, unintitled to pardon of ſin, to ſupplies of grace, to reward of obedience: till God, in the covenant of baptiſm, affords us relief in all theſe reſpects; and ſo *tranſlates us from the power of darkneſs into the kingdom*

* Rom. vi. 2. † Eph. v. 14. ‡ Phil. ii. 12, 13. § 2 Cor. v. 17
|| Rom. vii. 18. ¶ Verſe 22. * Rom. ii. 14.

of his dear Son *. Here then begins our new creation or birth: and our remaining concern is, to behave as dutiful children to our heavenly Father; and by uſing the preſcribed means of ſpiritual growth, be careful to arrive at fullneſs of ſtature and ſtrength in Chriſt. The firſt creation was not completed in a moment, but gradually finiſhed in the ſpace of ſix days: after which, Adam was left to cultivate the garden that God had planted. The ſecond hath no certain time preſcribed it: but advances faſter or ſlower, with fewer or more frequent interruptions, to greater or leſs perfection, according as men lay hold on, or neglect, the aſſiſtances always ready for them.

Some are *trained up*, and walk from the firſt, *in the way wherein they ſhould go* †: and though guilty of many ſmall errors, through infirmity and ſurpriſe, yet, avoiding great and wilful deviations, they advance continually to a happy end of their journey. Now theſe cannot well perceive any ſudden change in the condition of their ſouls; for their improvement is uſually very gradual: much leſs any change in it from bad to good; for it hath always been good from their earlieſt acquaintance with it. Too many indeed may imagine this falſely: but others, through God's mercy, may know it to be true, that they have always lived religiouſly, from genuine Chriſtian principles. Like Timothy, *they have known the holy ſcriptures from children, which are able to make them wiſe unto ſalvation* ‡. And ſuch, far from having reaſon to doubt their acceptance with God, becauſe they have never experienced grievous terrors and bitter ſorrows, have the higheſt reaſon to rejoice, that they have found the *ways of wiſdom pleaſantneſs and peace* §, from their very entrance upon them: and ſhall be rewarded in the end for a whole life, ſpent as it ought.

But far more commonly, men have committed heinous offences, or indulged themſelves in the omiſſion of important duties. And then more particular and deep repentance is neceſſary: followed by a change of diſpoſitions within, as well as external behaviour: elſe their baptiſmal regeneration will only aggravate their guilt. But even the converſion of ſuch is not always accompanied with extremely vehement agitations

* Col. i. 13. † Prov. xxii. 6. ‡ 2 Tim. iii. 15. § Prov. iii. 17

tions of mind: but theſe differ, according to their various tempers, and the free operations of the divine Spirit. Nay, indeed, ſome feel the moſt tormenting agonies, yet harden their hearts againſt them and go on: while others are effectually amended by the influence of mild convictions and a calm concern. And whether it be a call loud as thunder, or whether it be *a ſtill ſmall voice* * that ſpeaks: if we do but hearken to it, all is well.

Nor is the recovery of ſinners always equally ſudden. Some, like St Paul, are awakened and enlightened inſtantaneouſly, throw off a habit of wickedneſs at one effort, and are changed that moment into newneſs of life. Others, after their firſt alarm, long maintain a doubtful ſtruggle with their vicious inclinations: one while ſeeming to have fought the good fight ſucceſsfully, then entangled anew in their former bondage: a painful and dangerous ſituation: out of which notwithſtanding, through almighty grace, there are thoſe who eſcape *into the glorious liberty of the children of God* †. And to a third ſort, whoſe diſorders, though but too threatening, are leſs violent, health is reſtored by ſlow, and gentle, and almoſt imperceptible ſteps. Now, it may be as impoſſible for theſe to fix the preciſe time, when their faith and penitence were carried juſt far enough to make them objects of God's forgiveneſs, as it often is to determine exactly the moment when the ſun riſes upon the earth, though it hath evidently been growing light a great while. Without queſtion, as ſoon as any one hath that faith in Chriſt which will produce a life of good works, he is juſtified by his faith alone, and his ſins forgiven. But though God always knows this time exactly, men very often may not, or rather very ſeldom can. They may have comfortable hopes and perſuaſions, firſt weaker, then ſtronger: and yet, through mere humility, may entertain ſome doubts, not of the divine promiſes, but of their own qualifications, longer than they have cauſe. And theſe doubts may be graciouſly permitted, as very uſeful incitements both to diligence and caution. Our Bible no where teaches, that every one, who is forgiven, knows the hour of his forgiveneſs: or even knows with certainty, that God hath granted it. He muſt indeed, as he amends, perceive the alteration made in him:

* 1 Kings xix. 12. † Rom. viii. 21.

and in general, a pleasing hope and faith of sharing in the divine mercy must increase along with it: but he may still not be sure, whether it is yet complete enough to be a proof, that he hath obtained pardon. Some are *weak in faith* *: others are *strong* † and *abound in it* ‡. But conceiving ourselves to be of the latter sort, gives us no title to pass sentence against the former. And we should be very fearful of judging our Brethren rashly; who, with all their modest apprehensions, may perhaps have as real, perhaps a greater interest in God's favour, than some of those who declare them to have none. And yet, if these hard censures proceed, not from ill will, or bitterness of spirit, but from the warmth of a well-meaning zeal, even the persons injured by them should think mildly, and, in the main, well, of the authors of them, least they retaliate hardship, while they complain of it.

But further, as the spiritual life may, in different persons, be attended with different degrees of evidence, it may likewise advance to different degrees of perfection. Indeed, when God created the heavens and the earth, he *saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good* §. Nor, in the new creation, is any part of what he doth defective. But even pious persons are wanting to themselves: and hence some of them come greatly short of others; and the best, of what they might and ought to have been. For, though all Christians are exhorted to perfection, and all real Christians labour after it, and, in God's gracious construction, finally arrive at it; and some have the title given them by way of eminence, on account of their uncommon proficiency: yet, speaking strictly, *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* ‖; nor did even St Paul think, *he had already attained, or was already perfect* ¶.

But here, as before, it is of the utmost importance not to err. They, who allow themselves in the habitual omission of any one known duty, or the habitual practice of any one known sin; they who have committed any single act of deliberate gross sin, without heartily repenting of it, and carefully avoiding it afterwards; are not good persons with imperfections, but wicked ones under guilt and condemnation. The imperfections

* Rom xiv. 1. † Rom. iv. 20. ‡ Col ii. 7. § Gen. i. 31.
‖ 1 John i. 8. ¶ Phil. iii. 12.

imperfections of the good are of quite another kind: ſlight weakneſſes, ſudden ſurpriſes, inconſiderate failures, undiſcerned unreaſonableneſs in temper and behaviour; honeſtly watched againſt upon the whole, yet returning from time to time, ſubjects of daily concern and general humiliation. Let no one therefore flatter himſelf, that becauſe all men have their faults, he may wilfully indulge his without danger. Nor let any one be ſo abſurdly cunning, as to think of making a near bargain in religion: and contriving to be juſt ſo good as to eſcape future miſery; and yet no better, than he needs muſt. Though we aim to do our utmoſt, we ſhall be ſure to fall beneath the rule of our duty: but if we aim at leſs, we ſhall be too likely to fail of the acceptance of our Maker. True goodneſs includes in it the love of goodneſs. No one can be religious and virtuous in earneſt, without ſincerely deſiring to be more ſo; and feeling the truth of what Wiſdom, in the ſon of Sirach, aſſerts of herſelf: *they, that eat me, ſhall yet be hungry: and they, that drink me, ſhall yet be thirſty: for my memorial is ſweeter than honey; and mine inheritance than the honey-comb* *. Such therefore, as are, perhaps in no reſpect, poſitively either vicious or profane, but negligent and thoughtleſs; willing to go to heaven, with as little trouble, and as much indulgence, as ever they can; and, of the two, rather more afraid of being over good, than downright bad; are already, to ſpeak the moſt favourably of them, in a very unpromiſing condition; and, unleſs they make haſte to get into a better, will ſoon be in a worſe.

Another thing ſtill, to be obſerved concerning the new creation, is, that as it may be carried to different degrees of perfection, ſo it may be attended with different degrees of comfort. Nor is there any proof from ſcripture or experience, that perſons equally pious are filled in this world with equal joy and conſolation. They, that have a greater ſhare than ordinary of ſuch delightful perceptions, ought undoubtedly, if the tenor of their lives afford cauſe for them, to be very thankful. But ſuch as have the leaſt, if *their hearts condemn them not*, may *have confidence towards God* †; and be aſſured, that the ſmallneſs of their preſent degree of comfort *ſhall work together* with *all* other *things for their* future *good* ‡. Indeed the very ſame

* Eccluſ. xxiv. 21, 20. † 1 John. iii. 21. ‡ Rom. viii. 28.

ſame perſons, without any other change in their ſpiritual ſtate, find, at times, elevations, depreſſions, inſenſibilities, for which they can only account by variations, viſible or ſuppoſed, in their bodily health, or God's unſearchable will and pleaſure. Again, very bad people too often *truſt in themſelves, that they are righteous** ; and rejoice on groundleſs preſumptions; while, on the other hand, though the good muſt, in their compoſed hours, feel ſome ſatisfaction in the hope, that they are ſuch; and therefore every one ought to reflect, whether he hath, on ſerious thought, felt that ſatisfaction, or not; yet the light of God's countenance hath been frequently withdrawn from ſome of the beſt of men, and *their ſouls diſquieted within them*†. Nay, even our Saviour complained, that, in reſpect to the chearing influences of his preſence, *God hath forſaken him* ‡. So that no one can juſtly think well or ill of himſelf on ſuch accounts, as theſe. The Pſalmiſt hath told us, that *they, who ſow in tears, ſhall reap in joy*: and *he that now goeth on his way weeping, and beareth forth good ſeed, ſhall doubtleſs come again with joy, and bring his ſheaves with him* §. And the prophet hath ſtated both this caſe, and its oppoſite. *Who is among you, that feareth the Lord, and obeyeth the voice of his ſervant, that walketh in darkneſs, and hath no light? Let him truſt in the name of the Lord, and ſtay upon his God. Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, and compaſs yourſelf about with ſparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the ſparks that ye have kindled. This ſhall ye have of mine hand; ye ſhall lie down in ſorrow* ||.

The only ſure evidence therefore of the goodneſs of our condition, is the ſincerity of an obedience, flowing from motives truly Chriſtian. And accordingly, what the apoſtle calls here in the text *a new creature*, he calls, in a parallel place of the preceding chapter, *faith working by love* ¶, and in another, *keeping the commandments of God* #. So that when he ſaith, the new creature will avail, and nothing elſe, he ſaith it on ſuppoſition of its being ſo compleated, as to anſwer its end: which end unleſs we are careful to attain, by exerting the principles of the ſpiritual life conferred on us in baptiſm, and growing up in all Chriſtian graces; however great a bleſſing in

* Luke xviii. 9. † Pſal. xlii. 6. ‡ Matth. xxvii. 46. § Pſal. cxxvi. 6.
|| Iſa. l. 10, 11. ¶ Gal. v. 6. # 1 Cor. vii. 19.

in itſelf our ſacramental regeneration is, it will be none to us: but we had better not have been born, better not have been new born, if it only intitles us to privileges, that we finally forfeit; and become, to uſe St Jude's expreſſion, *twice dead* *. Our Saviour hath told us, that the *tree is known by its fruit* †. And *the fruits of the Spirit* are the virtues of a holy life ‡. If we experience theſe, we have a mark of our acceptance with God, which cannot deceive: all other marks, all other feelings, be they ever ſo lively, ever ſo pleaſing, may. Doubtleſs, *if any man have not the Spirit of Chriſt, he is none of his* §. Our pious diſpoſitions, our well-grounded comforts, all proceed from the Holy Ghoſt: and we can have neither, without perceiving them. But we may perceive them, without certainly knowing, by the manner of the perception, that they are his work: it ſuffices, that, on the authority of ſcripture, we believe they are. And ſcripture hath no where taught us to diſtinguiſh, what impulſes, or ſenſations within us, come from God, and what from a different ſource, by the mere ſtrength and delightfulneſs of them. Without queſtion, clear and joyful perſuaſions of our intereſt in the divine favour, if we have foundation to judge that we are intitled to them, are the greateſt felicity that we can enjoy in this world. But whoever relies on ſuch perſuaſions alone, inſtead of examining what ground they ſtand upon, expoſes himſelf to the utmoſt danger of being miſled by a heated imagination, of a ſinful confidence: of which kind of deluſions the hiſtory of the church in all ages hath been full. And whoever determines either his own ſtate towards God, or that of any one elſe, to be a bad one, for want of ſuch tokens of its being a good one, contradicts the rule of holy writ. *Every one, that doth righteouſneſs, is born of him* ||, and unwiſely dejects himſelf, or uncharitably condemns his Brother.

Let us therefore be very cautious not to fancy the paths of religion either narrower or broader, than they are: neither to *make the heart of the righteous ſad, whom God hath not made ſad; nor ſtrengthen the hands of the wicked, by promiſing him life* ¶: for of both theſe errors we may be guilty at once.

But

* Jude ver. 12. † Matth. xii. 33. ‡ Gal. v. 22. Eph. v. 9.
§ Rom. viii. 9. || 1 John ii. 29. ¶ Ezek. xiii. 22.

But in order to avoid both, let us form our notions of ourſelves and others by God's unerring word, interpreted with the reaſonableneſs and mildneſs of a truly Chriſtian temper; and then we ſhall quickly diſcern, that the only ſure teſt of good and bad perſons is that, which St John hath ſo ſolemnly delivered from above: *This then is the meſſage, which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkneſs at all. If we ſay, that we have fellowſhip with him, and walk in darkneſs*, that is, wickedneſs, *we lie, and do not the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light*, if we ſtudiouſly imitate the purity and holineſs of our heavenly Father, *we have fellowſhip one with another, and the blood of Jeſus Chriſt his Son, cleanſeth us from all ſin* *.

* 1 John i. 5, 6, 7.

SERMONS

SERMON XCI.

THE DEATH OF STEPHEN, A PATTERN OF FAITH AND FORGIVENESS.

ACTS vii. 59, 60.

And they ſtoned Stephen, calling upon God, and ſaying, Lord Jeſus, receive my Spirit.—And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this ſin to their charge. And when he had ſaid this, he fell aſleep.

AS the intereſts of religion and virtue require that due regards be paid to the memory of pious and good perſons; and as they, who have laid down their lives for God and their duty, have given the ſtrongeſt proofs of their attachment to the nobleſt cauſe; ſo the Chriſtian church hath, from the beginning, ſhewn diſtinguiſhed honours to thoſe profeſſors of its holy faith, who have ſealed their Teſtimony to it with their blood. The firſt Martyr, or witneſs, of this kind, after the bleſſed Jeſus himſelf, was St Stephen, a man *full of faith, and of the Holy Ghoſt, and of power, and of wiſdom* *, whoſe death is related in the text. And we find in the next verſe but one, that *devout men carried him*, with decent ſolemnity, *to his burial*, and made great *lamentation over him*; undoubtedly mixed with equal triumph, that he had finiſhed his courſe in ſo exemplary a manner: nor were they withheld from it by fear of the reſentment, to which ſo public an inſtance of reſpect muſt provoke his murderers, and all their adherents.

* Acts vi. 3, 5, 8, 10.

Two of the moſt ancient monuments of eccleſiaſtical hiſtory, that we have, excepting the New Teſtament, are the accounts of the martyrdom, of Ignatius and Polycarp, both diſciples of St John, written, at the time of their ſuffering, by the churches of Antioch and Smyrna, of which they were biſhops. And in thoſe they mention, as of courſe, their purpoſe of celebrating yearly the feſtival of their birth-days, of their entrance into a better life, for the commemoration of their excellent graces, and the incitement of others to imitate them. Thus did they provide, that *the righteous ſhould be had in everlaſting remembrance**: and obſerved the more particular direction, given to that intent in the epiſtle to the *Hebrews: Remember them, which have* [*had*†] *the rule over you, who have ſpoken unto you the word of God; whoſe faith follow, conſidering the end,* the event, *of their converſation.* The reſt of the primitive churches appear to have followed the ſame rule: and each to have honoured the more eminent of their own martyrs, who had been uſually their teachers alſo, by anniverſary aſſemblies for preſerving the reverence due to their characters, and offering up thanks to God for their examples.

But the increaſe of their numbers, and the adoption of the ſufferers of one church into the liturgies of others, and the admiſſion of eminently good perſons, who had *not reſiſted unto blood*‡, and the frequent grants, which in ſubſequent ages were made of ſo high a diſtinction, with little care of previous inquiry, multiplied the returns of theſe ſolemnities very improperly and inconveniently. Then beſides, a ſtill greater evil was, that praiſes and panegyrics too ſoon grew to be immoderate, and afterwards impious. In the vehemence of oratorical encomiums and exclamations, the ſaint was called upon as preſent, till by degrees he was thought ſo: and what at firſt was merely a bold and moving figure of ſpeech, became at length, in good earneſt, a prayer; which requeſted of a dead man, who was unable to hear it, not only that he would intercede with God in behalf of his fellow-ſervants, but that he would himſelf beſtow ſuch bleſſings upon them, as no creature hath in his power. Things being found in this condition at the Reformation, it was neceſſary, both to abolish intirely

* Pſal. cxii. 6. † So it ſhould be tranſlated, Heb. xiii. 7. ‡ Heb. xii. 4.

entirely theſe unlawful addreſſes, and to limit the original ſort of commemorations to a moderate liſt of perſons, indiſputably worthy of them. Accordingly no day is appointed by our church for the celebration of any other, than the principal ſaints, mentioned in the New Teſtament, it being hard to ſtop, if more were added. And amongſt theſe, St Stephen is the only one, who ſtands ſolely on the foot of being a martyr: as indeed it was fit, that the foremoſt, the leader, of that *noble army* ſhould be diſtinguiſhed, and choſen as it were, to repreſent the reſt. Now we ſhall keep his feſtival in a due manner, if we make uſe of it to place before our thoughts,

I. The ſinfulneſs of perſecution for conſcience ſake.

II. The excellency of bearing it well.

I. The ſinfulneſs of perſecution for conſcience ſake.

Taking away the lives, the fortunes, the liberty, any of the rights of our brethren, merely for ſerving their Maker in ſuch manner as they are perſuaded they ought, when by ſo doing they hurt not human ſociety, or any member of it, materially, is evidently inconſiſtent with all juſtice and humanity: for it is puniſhing thoſe, who have not injured us; nor is it leſs inconſiſtent with policy and common prudence. For thus many will be driven from amongſt us, who might have been very uſeful: and ſuch of the ſame opinion, as ſtay behind, will be tempted to become either open or ſecret enemies, in order to free themſelves from the hardſhips which they ſuffer, and revenge themſelves on the authors of them: from which motives have proceeded the bloodieſt wars, the moſt ſhocking maſſacres, the moſt heinous barbarities, that have ever diſgraced human nature. Or ſhould men comply againſt their judgments, and live quietly; from being hypocrites in the great point of their religion, they will too probably grow diſhoneſt in others. And though their poſterity may at length be ſincere; and ſo what we think truth be promoted in our part of the world: yet if the reſt ſhould be induced by our example to promote what they think truth, in the ſame way, it will by no means be a gainer on the whole. Fair argument and equitable behaviour are the natural methods of ſpreading it: and it will never thrive by any oppoſite ones. This being the caſe, imagining that God can enjoin religious cruelties, or fail to be diſpleaſed with them, is thinking ſo unworthily and abſurdly of him, that few things are more ſur-

priſing, than the wide extent and long prevalence of ſo monſtrous an error. And nothing diſtinguiſhes this age and nation more to its honour, than its entertaining in general ſo right ſentiments on the ſubject before us.

When and where perſecution began, hath been controverted. Some have charged the Jews with giving the firſt example of it, by extirpating the Canaanites, and puniſhing idolatry with death amongſt their own people. But the Canaanites were extirpated, not for harmleſs religious opinions or obſervances, but for monſtrous and unnatural cruelties and impurities, practiſed in their worſhip and out of it: by which, continued through many generations, their iniquity, being at length, as the ſcripture expreſſes it, *full**; God appointed the Iſraelites, as appeared by the evidence of numerous miracles, to execute his vengeance upon them: which command was probably deſigned to give them a greater abhorrence of the like enormities; and certainly they were bound to obey it. But they neither claimed any right elſe to puniſh thoſe nations; nor any right at all to puniſh other nations, though guilty of the ſame crimes.

Nor amongſt themſelves were they authoriſed to proceed criminally againſt any perſons on account of their faith or devotions, excepting the adorers of the neighbouring falſe deities; or of the true one by an image. Now ſuch of thoſe deities, as had been men, had been ſuch dangerous patterns of wickedneſs; and the ſervice of them all was ſo full of deteſtable abominations, that paying them any honour muſt be of very bad conſequence; but paying them thoſe, which they were underſtood to claim, worſe than atheiſm itſelf. And ſetting up images of the true God had ſo ſtrong and immediate a tendency to lower the reverence of him, and bring him down to a level with the reſt, that the miſchief was only one degree removed. Beſides, it no way appears, that the Hebrew idolaters held it their duty to be ſuch: but licentiouſneſs, or miſtaken policy, or love of novelty, or ſome wrong inducement of that ſort, led them to adopt the divinities of their neighbours; ſtill believing in Jehovah, though practically they forſook him. And therefore, as conſcience did not require their falſe worſhip, it was not injured by the prohibition

* Gen. xv. 16.

bition of it. Nor muſt we forget, that God having condeſcended to be their ſupreme civil magiſtrate, as well as the object of their adoration; owning another god was treaſon, as well as idolatry: which never was the caſe of any one nation in the world beſides.

It is therefore amongſt the heathens, that we muſt look for the origin of real perſecution. Yet, we confeſs, moſt of them tolerated, and even incorporated, a great variety of deities, and modes of worſhip: becauſe they ſuppoſed, that the former might be all true, and the latter all acceptable. And therefore it was not readily concluded from a man's having a religion of his own, that he denied that of the ſtate. But when there ſeemed cauſe to apprehend that he did, it was deemed, in ſome of the freeſt conſtitutions, a capital crime: as the known caſe of Socrates fully proves. There were indeed but but few ſuch puniſhments, becauſe there were but few ſuch offences, real or pretended: for men uſually ſpoke and acted as the laws of their country preſcribed, whatever they thought: till the Jews, in their captivities and diſperſions, refuſing to worſhip any other god, than the one inviſible Maker of heaven and earth, provoked, by ſo doing, Pagan bigotry; and, inſtead of being the firſt perſecutors, were amongſt the firſt martyrs; indeed to true piety were the very firſt, Socrates having always conformed to the religion of Athens, and being unjuſtly condemned as rejecting it. Yet as the Jews were not commanded to propagate their faith, but only to profeſs it, which however did propagate it in ſome meaſure; the number of their ſufferers for conſcience ſake, except in the time of the Maccabees, was very ſmall, when compared with thoſe of the primitive Chriſtians.

For the apoſtles of our bleſſed Lord, their companions and ſucceſſors, being intruſted by him with a commiſſion the moſt beneficial to mankind that ever was; that of notifying to the Jews, that their promiſed Meſſiah was come; of converting the Gentiles from idolatry, and teaching all men the genuine love of God and their neighbour, as the way to eternal happineſs; became, for undertaking this good work, (though they proceeded in it moſt reſpectfully to magiſtrates, and inoffenſively to all men) objects of public rage, inſtead of Gratitude. Nor were they only, but their followers of both ſexes, purſued with warmer zeal, and deſtroyed by more exquiſite

torments,

torments, than the vileſt malefactors: nor was the continuance of theſe barbarities, excepting ſome intervals, much leſs than three hundred years. Yet none of them were retaliated, when, in ſpight of them all, our faith, by its own reaſonableneſs, and the unwearied patience of its adherents, had prevailed, and was become the reigning one: not even the bittereſt perſecutors were puniſhed for all the murders, which they had committed. Nor did any erroneous Chriſtian ſuffer death from a Chriſtian magiſtrate for his errors, for a long while afterwards: nor was any law made for that end, I believe, in one thouſand years from our Saviour's coming. In proceſs of time indeed the rulers of the church of Rome, having already introduced other corruptions into our holy profeſſion, ſupported them in introducing this alſo. But when they were become perſecutors, much truer and more orthodox Chriſtians became once more willing martyrs. Amongſt theſe our firſt reformers were eminent: ſince whoſe days, liberty of conſcience and the religious rights of mankind have been aſſerted on more ſolid grounds, in a fuller extent, and with greater conſiſtence, than ever was done before. Nor I hope will the members of our communion ever forget to exerciſe, either due caution againſt the open and ſecret attempts of thoſe blood-thirſty and faith-breaking tyrants, or due moderation towards all, who peaceably diſſent from us.

And they, who accuſe Chriſtianity of the cruelties, committed by the profeſſors of it, ſhould conſider, how much its genuine profeſſors abominate even the ſmalleſt of them, and every tendency to them. But indeed theſe our adverſaries, who would ſeem to abhor a perſecuting ſpirit beyond all men, and complain of our religion, as encouraging it, have ſingular need to examine, of what ſpirit they are themſelves: and whether they do not by falſe imputations, and *cruel mockings* *, the only weapons which they have at command, perſecute, moſt unrighteouſly, (without any pretence of conſcience to oblige them to it) both Chriſtian faith, and natural piety, without ſparing, in ſeveral inſtances, even moral virtue. A proper ſenſe of their own vehemences would incline them to excuſe, as far as poſſible, thoſe of other men, and reſtrain them from going on to bring charges againſt the innocent and guilty, promiſcuouſly.

* Heb. xi. 36.

miſcuouſly. But though we were all as bad in this reſpect, as they imagine the worſt of us to be, it would by no means affect the truth of the ſcripture doctrine, which is far from encouraging force in matters of faith. The patriarchal religion is free from all ſhadow of blame in that reſpect: the Jewiſh hath been ſufficiently vindicated: and the Chriſtian fully clears itſelf. Our bleſſed Lord reproved his diſciples, when they would have called down fire from heaven on the *Samaritans*; who, beſides being both heretics and ſchiſmatics, had uſed him perſonally ill; and told them, *that the Son of man was not come to deſtroy mens lives, but to ſave them* *. And though in a parable he uſes the words, *compel them to come in* †; both the whole of the context, and the whole of his inſtructions, particularly thoſe which he gave to his apoſtles when he firſt ſent them forth, irrefragably prove, that the only compulſion intended was that of cogent reaſons and preſſing exhortations. Accordingly St Paul plainly aſſerts, that *the weapons of our warfare are not carnal* ‡, but that we are to *inſtruct in meekneſs thoſe that oppoſe themſelves* §. We are not then authorized to raiſe perſecution; but, on the contrary, commanded patiently to ſuffer it. And therefore I now proceed,

II. To ſhew the excellency of this duty: and particularly, as practiſed by the firſt Chriſtians.

I have already obſerved, that as moſt of the heathens thought all religions might be true, they were in little danger of ſuffering for any: and amongſt ſuch, as thought their eſtabliſhed faith and worſhip falſe and even miſchievous, few or none had the patriotiſm to declare againſt it, or the ſincerity to refuſe complying with it. The Jews, who, ſo long as they obſerved their law, were aſſured of national proſperity, had ſmall need of precepts to undergo perſecution for it willingly: which however they did undergo with admirable fortitude, when the ſins of the people in general had brought the pious part, along with themſelves, into diſtreſs. And it is a moving deſcription, which the epiſtle to the *Hebrews* gives of their ſufferings. *They had trial of mockings and ſcourgings, of bonds and impriſonment: they were ſtoned, they were ſawn aſunder, were ſlain with the ſword: they went about in ſheep-ſkins and goat-ſkins, being deſtitute, afflicted, tormented; of whom*

* Luke ix 54, 55, 56. † Luke xiv. 23. ‡ 2 Cor. x 4.
§ 2 Tim. ii. 25.

whom the world was not worthy: they wandered in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth *.

Their afflictions however were only occasional consequences of the idolatry of their countrymen. But Christianity set out from the first with our Saviour's predictions to his disciples, that *they should be hated of all nations, delivered up, and killed for his name's sake* †; with their predictions to their converts, that *all, who would live godly in Christ Jesus, must suffer persecution* ‡; with immediate and dreadful examples of these truths; with the express command, *be faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life* §. And faithful accordingly they were to such a degree, as nothing but consciousness of truth, and divine assistance, could possibly make them.

The apostles gave no proofs of courage in the first part of their history. They all deserted our Saviour, as soon as ever he was apprehended: one of them was terrified, without any particularly great occasion, into denying him: and even after his resurrection, nay probably his ascension too, they kept their assemblies very private, *for fear of the Jews* ‖: What was it then, that changed them into such different persons, within the space of a few days? What could it be else, than the completion, recorded in the Acts, of our Saviour's promise, *Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, and all Judea, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth* ¶. With what surprising boldness, immediately upon this, doth the late apostate, St Peter, *standing up with the eleven, lift up his voice, and say, ye men of Judea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words* **; *let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, Lord and Christ* ††. This was not a passionate and inconsiderate courage. For what had there happened, that could raise it in them all? And what could possibly be milder and more rational, than their uniform temper and behaviour: which, their answer to the threatenings of the rulers, both so resolutely and decently expresses? *Whether it be right in the sight of God, to hearken unto you more than*

* Heb. xi. 36, 37, 38. † Matth xxiv. 9. ‡ 2 Tim. iii. 12.
§ Rev. ii. 10. ‖ John xx. 19. Acts i. 13. 14. ¶ Acts i. 8.
** Acts ii. 14. †† Verse 36.

*than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but ſpeak the things which we have ſeen and heard** .

As they bore teſtimony, not merely to doctrines and opinions, but to plain and repeated, though miraculous facts, of which their ſenſes were perfect judges, they could not miſtake. And what could they hope for by attempting to deceive? They muſt each of them know themſelves to be every way unqualified for conducting a fraud of this nature. They had ſeen juſt before, that they could not truſt, either to the bravery, or the fidelity, one of another. Or if they could, a great part of what they ſaid might eaſily be confuted notwithſtanding, if it was not true. For aught appears, they might have returned to their former occupations with great ſafety. But if they went on in this new way: they knew the magiſtrates were vehement againſt them; they ſaw the people, at beſt, would do nothing to ſupport them; and the fate of their maſter was full before their eyes. In theſe circumſtances, worldly advantage could not be their motive. And fondneſs of acquiring glory amongſt their followers was not likely to overbalance the fear of puniſhment, in men of their education; eſpecially in a number of them; beſides that, humanly ſpeaking, they could expect neither glory nor followers. And in fact they were held in the loweſt contempt by moſt men, and honoured but by few. Or ſhould we ſuppoſe, that, contrary to all probability, and to the expreſs notices given them, they looked for better treatment in carrying on their undertaking, than they found: yet when they perceived their diſappointment, would no one of them have been ſo honeſt, as to own his error, and detect his accomplices; or at leaſt ſo wiſe, as to withdraw himſelf out of harm's way? Would they all have gone on, year after year, ſupporting perſecution and death, one after another: neither taking warning nor complaining, but rejoicing and triumphing? Hear only, what a deſcription St Paul gives of their and his own condition. *God hath ſet forth us the apoſtles laſt, as it were appointed to death: we are made a ſpectacle unto the world:—even unto this preſent hour, we both hunger and thirſt, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place; and labour, working with our own hands;—we are made as the filth of the world, and are the off-ſcouring of all*

* Acts iv. 18, 19, 20.

things unto this day *. Could they have chosen to bear this from any other principle, than that which he elsewhere mentions? *We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair: persecuted, but not forsaken: cast down, but not destroyed. We are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh: knowing that he, which raised up the Lord Jesus, shall raise up us also by Jesus: for which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day* *, Nor were they affected in this heroic manner, only while death might possibly be at a distance from them; but the nearer it approached, the more they felt of the same Spirit. *I am now,* saith St Paul, *ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day* †. Can there be words in language more expressive of conscious integrity, and composed fortitude?

But this was far from the whole excellence of that frame of mind, with which they met sufferings. Could they have delighted themselves with the thought of vengeance falling on their adversaries, either from men or from God, in the present life or the next, it might possibly have given some poor consolation and support to corrupt nature under torments and death. But their Master's rule was, *Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you* ‡. Had he meant only to harden them into a bold unfeeling obstinacy, he would never have required of them such tenderness of kind affection towards adversaries: a temper so very inconsistent with all the common excitements to courage in resisting them. And had they found themselves unable to attain such exalted virtue, to which none almost before them had even made pretensions, they would have concealed or dropt his precept, or explained it away. But, on the contrary, they professed it to its full extent. *Though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity,* that is, universal love to all men, *it profiteth me nothing* §. And they practised it, as they professed it. *Being reviled,*

* 2 Cor. iv. 9, 11, 12, 13. † 2 Cor. iv. 8, 9, 11, 14, 16.
‡ 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8. § Matth. v. 44. ‖ 1 Cor. xiii. 3.

reviled, we bleſs: being perſecuted, we ſuffer it: being defamed, we intreat *. They expreſſed all the kindneſs, they made all the excuſes, for their perſecutors, which they poſſibly could. Thus the ſame St Paul: *I have great heavineſs, and continual ſorrow in my heart,—for my brethren, who are Iſraelites* †: *my heart's deſire and prayer to God for Iſrael is, that they might be ſaved. For I bear them record, that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge* ‡. Nor was this their manner of ſpeaking, only when at eaſe, or when they could hope to obtain favour by it: but, as the caſe of St Stephen ſhews, their ſentiments were the ſame, under the certainty, under the actual pains, of death itſelf, even when ſuddenly and tumultuouſly inflicted on them. For he prayed at once to the Lord Jeſus, with his laſt breath, to receive his ſpirit, and to forgive them that ſtoned him.

Such was the bleſſed temper of the firſt witneſſes to the Chriſtian faith: and their ſucceſſors inherited a noble degree of it. They could not indeed give any equally ſtrong teſtimony to the original facts, on which it was built; but they atteſted many ſubſequent ones of great importance. And not only their embracing it, as they did, contrary to all the prejudices of common opinion, and all the dictates of every wrong inclination, makes it neceſſary to preſume, that they muſt have had powerful evidence for it: but their perſeverance in profeſſing it, amidſt every thing terrible in life or death, fully proves them to have been thoroughly ſincere, and ſingularly magnanimous. Indeed it proves further, that more than ordinary ſtrength was vouchſafed to them from above. For though natural conſtancy and bravery have in ſome inſtances performed wonders, yet the performers have been few in proportion: whereas the primitive Chriſtians in general, of both ſexes, all ages, all ranks, underwent the moſt grievous inflictions with the calmeſt patience. Obſerve too: they could have little hope of diſtinguiſhing themſelves in the opinion of their fellow-chriſtians by ſuffering. For though a few of the principal martyrs were highly honoured, yet the reſt were too numerous, either to be remembered after their death, or have notice taken of them at the time of it. Nor did their intrepidity ariſe from being trained up to the reſolution of

* 1 Cor. iv. 12, 13. † Rom. ix. 2, 3, 4. ‡ Rom. x 1, 2.

martyrdom. For this would often have failed: and beſides, new converts, juſt made, as boldly ſuffered death as any others; nay, ſometimes perſecutors themſelves became converts on the ſpot, and died with thoſe, whom they had brought to execution. Still it was not merely a ſudden vehemence, which they catched one of another. For not only particular perſons had often the leiſure of long impriſonments to cool in: but the whole church had many and conſiderable intervals of peace. Yet, whenever perſecution began again, it found the generality of Chriſtians in the ſame ſpirit, which they ſhewed before: reſpectful in the higheſt degree to civil authority; but unmoveable to an equal degree from their duty to God: where they were ever ſo few, not to be forced or perſuaded into the ſlighteſt act of idolatry; where they were ever ſo many, not to be provoked into a ſingle attempt of rebellion; or into making or joining any party or faction for their own ſecurity; though the frequent changes in the ſtate gave them inviting opportunities for it. In the comfortleſs exerciſe (for ſo it muſt appear to common ſpectators,) of this cool paſſive courage, infinitely more difficult than the active and enterpriſing ſort, they patiently perſevered for three hundred years. The wonderfulneſs of the behaviour moved men to inquire into the grounds of it: they found them good; they came over; and the empire was become in effect Chriſtian, before the emperors ceaſed to perſecute.

The unjuſtifiable veneration, addreſſed by the church of Rome to ſaints and martyrs, hath deterred almoſt all the reformed churches, except our own, from paying them even due honours. And now, amongſt ourſelves, prejudice againſt religion in ſome, and indifference to it in others, hath made theſe excellent perſons be regarded commonly, either with a malignant or a negligent eye. But if they, who have acted or ſuffered gallantly, for the liberties or other intereſts of a ſingle nation, have been reverenced by diſtant ages, and all their faults hid under that one virtue: how much higher eſteem do ſuch patriots deſerve, as have borne teſtimony with their blood againſt the tyranny of idolatry and immoral ſuperſtition; who have lived in miſery and died in torment, to aſſert the faith of one wiſe and good Maker and Ruler of all, of pardon for ſin, and aſſiſtance in virtue, derived to us by methods of infinite, though myſterious goodneſs; who have given to mankind,

both

both by their doctrine and example, the juſteſt rules of worthy and prudent conduct in this life; and ſpread through the world an aſſurance, founded on God's expreſs promiſe, (which alone could ſupport it,) of endleſs felicity in a life to come! ſhould our accounts of them be ever ſo imperfect, or meanly written: ſhould any of them appear no otherwiſe great, than as they were admirably good men: ſhould their zeal have ſometimes tranſported them beyond diſcretion; (though ſuch tranſports were few, and always condemned by the body of Chriſtians:) Or ſhould other, and even conſiderable, frailties be found mixed with the excellencies of ſome of them: yet, ſo long as we know that they were, and did what hath now been mentioned; we have ſurely cauſe to hold them for ever in moſt honourable eſtimation, and reſpect the goſpel of Chriſt much the more highly on account of ſuch witneſſes to its truth and efficacy.

10 But admiring them is nothing, unleſs we alſo imitate them, in their ſolicitude for its advancement, in their ſteady adherence to God and their duty, in their contempt of worldly advantages and pleaſures, loſſes and puniſhments; in their meekneſs under injuries, in their reſignation under pains and afflictions, in their love to their fellow-chriſtians and fellow-creatures, in their lively faith of a future recompence. We are not called, as they were, to *take joyfully the ſpoiling of our goods* *, *to ſuffer trouble, even unto bonds, as evil-doers* †, to undergo ſhame and torture, and *to die for the name of the Lord Jeſus* ‡. No *temptation hath taken us, but ſuch as is common to man* §. Ordinarily ſpeaking, we have nothing to perform, but what conduces on the whole to every one's preſent benefit: and we have nothing to bear, on account of our religion, but perhaps a little trifling ridicule from the vain and the vicious. Even ſuch perſecution indeed is very wicked in them; but need not in the leaſt be formidable to us. And if, for that alone, we are aſhamed to *confeſs* our Saviour *before men*, well may we expect that he ſhould *deny us before his Father, which is in heaven* ‖.

11 Let us therefore *hold faſt the profeſſion of our faith without wavering* ¶: never do any thing inconſiſtent with it for temporal

* Heb. x. 34. † 2 Tim. ii. 9. ‡ Acts xxi. 13. § 1 Cor. x. 13.
‖ Matth. x. 32, 33. ¶ Heb. x. 23.

poral prospects or fears: never pay court to the irreligious, by mean compliances with their talk or behaviour, in hopes of better quarter from them; for it will be much harder to stop afterwards, than to maintain our present ground: yet never be moved, either to passion against them, or uncharitableness towards them; but freely own their good qualities, while we carefully preserve an abhorrence of their bad ones; pity their unhappiness, while we condemn their sins; and earnestly pray, that they may repent and be forgiven. For thus shall we *adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things* *; and be *followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises* †.

* Tit. ii 1. † Heb. vi. 12.

SERMON

SERMON XCII.

RELIANCE ON THE SPIRIT OF GOD, UNITED WITH A PROPER RESPECT TO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING IN OUR ADDRESSES TO THE ALMIGHTY.

1 COR. xiv. 15.

—I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the underſtanding alſo: I will ſing with the Spirit, and I will ſing with the underſtanding alſo.

THESE words, in their firſt and ſtricteſt ſenſe, relate to thoſe gifts of inſpiration, which the primitive church enjoyed: the Holy Ghoſt then frequently enabling many members of it, beſides the apoſtles, to *ſpeak in tongues*, which they had never learned, *the wonderful works of God**; and dictating to them petitions and praiſes fitted to their circumſtances. But, as the ordinary gifts of Heaven to mankind are left to be managed according to the diſcretion of thoſe, who enjoy them; ſo the divine wiſdom preſerved an uniformity of conduct, and kept to the ſame rule, in reſpect of theſe extraordinary ones. *The ſpirits of the prophets*, as the apoſtle tells us, ver. 32. *were ſubject to the prophets*. It was in their choice, when they would uſe the power of ſpeaking with divers tongues: and on what occaſions they would produce the prayers and hymns, with which they were inſpired. In this, (and no wonder,) they did not all of them judge always prudently: their thankful zeal to publiſh theſe miraculous favours, and perhaps a too great, but very natural, ſelf-complacency in being poſſeſſed

* Acts ii. 11.

ſed of ſuch remarkable privileges, prompting ſome of them ſometimes to give demonſtrations of it in their aſſemblies, when few or none were preſent, who underſtood the language they ſpoke: in which caſe, the exerciſe of their endowments was only a hindrance to the ſtated, and though leſs admired, yet more uſeful devotions and inſtructions of the congregation in their native dialect. And therefore St. Paul, in the true ſpirit of Chriſtianity, reproves this oſtentation: reminds them, that the gift of tongues was deſigned to convince unbelievers by a ſeaſonable uſe of it, not to provoke their ſcorn, or bring diſorder into the church, by an unſeaſonable one; that the other gift of PROPHESYING, teaching men their Chriſtian duty, and exhorting them to the practice of it, (for this the word means here, and this the Jewiſh prophets made their chief buſineſs,) was a much more valuable thing, than that of ſpeaking to them, or to God, in languages known to few of them; which therefore they ſhould do modeſtly and ſparingly; never indeed, but when the ſpeaker, or ſome one preſent, was able to interpret what he ſaid ſo readily and properly, as might edify the hearers; for their conſtant endeavours ſhould be to exert all the powers of this kind, which the Holy Ghoſt had beſtowed on them, rationally and diſcreetly, ſo as to inform and improve others. *I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the underſtanding alſo: I will ſing with the Spirit, and I will ſing with the underſtanding alſo:* that is, every perſon endowed with ſupernatural abilities, of this or any other ſort, was to think himſelf bound to employ them in ſo diſcreet a manner, that all around him might be inſtructed and benefited, as much as poſſible.

This, you will find, on careful reading it, is the meaning of the text, and of the chapter in which it occurs. And the whole ſhews, both the truth of extraordinary and miraculous gifts at that time; (for had they not been real, no directions about them could have been wanted, or would have been given;) and alſo the admirable wiſdom and genuine goodneſs of the apoſtle, in which we may well preſume the reſt to have been like him. He permitted not theſe accompliſhments, wonderful and ſhining as they were, to interfere with the plain rules of order and edification; or to be at all ſet on a level with the humble virtue of Chriſtian charity, doing good to

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men from love of God. Now ſuch things as theſe are great confirmations of our holy religion, and do it great honour.

But though the firſt and immediate meaning of the text be what I have now explained; a more general inſtruction, and applicable to every age of the church, may be juſtly drawn from it. The ſame Divine Comforter, who inſpired the devotions of believers then, influences their hearts in the performance of them now: the ſame duty of uſing due precautions to make the ſervice of the church intelligible, which the apoſtle preſſed ſo ſtrongly in his own time, equally ſubſiſts in ours. And therefore the words which I have read to you, comprehend two points of doctrine, as needful at preſent as ever they were.

I. That good Chriſtians are aſſiſted by the Holy Ghoſt in offering up their petitions and praiſes. *I will pray with the Spirit: I will ſing with the Spirit.*

II. That we ſhould be very ſolicitous rightly to apprehend the ſenſe and fitneſs of what we ſay and do in God's worſhip; *I will pray, I will ſing, with the underſtanding alſo.*

I. That good Chriſtians are aſſiſted by the Holy Ghoſt in offering up their petitions and praiſes to their heavenly Father. The *Spirit of God* hath *ſtriven* with bad perſons *, and therefore doubtleſs effectually operated on pious ones, from the beginning of the world. The Pſalmiſt, on his falling into ſin, prays that God would *not take his Holy Spirit from him* †. And more eſpecially God promiſes, in the prophet Zechariah, that he will *pour* on his people *the Spirit of grace and of ſupplication* ‡. In the New Teſtament we are told, that *if any man have not the Spirit of Chriſt, he is none of his* §; that *the Spirit helpeth our infirmities* in prayer, *making interceſſion for us* ‖; that we are to *pray always with all prayer and ſupplication in the Spirit* ¶, and *praying in the Holy Ghoſt to keep ourſelves in the love of God* **.

But though it be undeniable, that the Holy Spirit, who indeed excites us to, and fits us for, every duty, doth not withhold his influences in this: yet how far they extend, is matter of diſpute; and particularly between thoſe who approve,

* Gen. vi. 3. † Pſal. li. 11. ‡ Zech. xii 10. § Rom. viii. 9.
‖ Verſe 26. ¶ Eph. vi. 18. ** Jude 20, 21

and thoſe who diſapprove, liturgies or forms of prayer. And which are in the right, it ſhall be the principal buſineſs of this diſcourſe to ſhew: not with intention to raiſe in you either hatred or contempt of any, who diſſent from our Church on that head, (God forbid!) but only to make you more ſenſible of the propriety and advantages of the way you are in; and incline you to that proportionable improvement by it, which God will expect.

Some then apprehend, that there is ſuch a gift, or ſpirit of prayer, beſtowed by the Holy Ghoſt on true Chriſtians, and peculiarly on all that are worthy to be miniſters of God's word, as enables them to addreſs themſelves to Heaven, on all occaſions, copiouſly and ſuitably, in unpremeditated words of their own: which they think ought not to be reſtrained by appointing forms, even for the public uſe of congregations. And ſometimes the text is quoted in ſupport of this opinion. But plainly, ſo far as it relates to words it relates to words inſpired; to which, in the ſtrict ſenſe, but few of theſe perſons themſelves lay any claim: for indeed it would be equalling their own compoſitions to the holy ſcripture. And excepting this miraculous gift of inſpired prayer, the word of God mentions no gift of ready expreſſion in prayer: nor have we the leaſt ground to conſider it as coming from above, any otherwiſe than as *every good gift*, every natural ability, which God hath conferred upon us, and every improvement, which he qualifies us to make by our induſtry, *is from above* *. For evidently this talent is one of that ſort: depending, partly on the fluency of ſpeech, to which people are born, partly on the art and diligence, which they uſe to increaſe it; and varying, as their health and ſpirits vary. Nor therefore is there any more harm in reſtraining this faculty, if good reaſons require it, than in reſtraining any other. Even the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, you have ſeen, were frequently put under ſome reſtraints: much more then may one of our ordinary powers. And they who call it limiting and ſtinting the Spirit, have no ſcripture warrant, either for the phraſe, or the thing which they underſtand by it. Nay, ſuppoſing the Holy Ghoſt did ever ſo peculiarly aſſiſt in directing the words of prayer, why ſhould we not think him as likely to have aſſiſted in the drawing up of the eſtabliſhed forms, as in the extemporeperformances

* James i. 17.

inances of thoſe who reject forms, and truſt to the ſudden dictates of their own fancy?

The *ſpirit of prayer* and *praying in* or *by the Spirit*, are indeed ſcripture terms: but, ſo far as they belong to the preſent age they ſignify, not being furniſhed with variety of phraſes in prayer, but a much more valuable bleſſing, having religious affections breathed into us by the Holy Ghoſt, for the exerciſe of this duty. And *quenching the Spirit**, in the only ſenſe, which can be applied to us, means extinguiſhing ſuch affections, by indulging ſin, or ſuffering them to die away through negligence. God is no more delightful with change of expreſſions, than with a repetition of the ſame: nor will ever be weary of a devout ſoul, for want of new language. Common reaſon pronounces this: and the bible confirms it. We find ſeveral forms of prayer, preſcribed on ſeveral occaſions in the law of Moſes†. We find afterwards a whole book of forms, the Pſalms of David. We find our Saviour frequenting the Jewiſh ſynagogue, which conſtantly uſed a form and a very mean one. We find him enjoining his diſciples a form of his own compoſing for them: *When ye pray, ſay Our Father*‡, and ſo on. Nay, at the very time, when the gift of inſpired prayer was common, there is a ſtrong appearance in the fourth chapter of the Acts, and the apoſtles and their followers uſed a form, there ſet down. For how elſe could *they lift up their voice, and ſay it with one accord*, as ver. 24. aſſures us they did? Probably the very next age after them practiſed this method of public worſhip, at leaſt in a good meaſure: and for more than 1400 years paſt it hath been without queſtion almoſt univerſally the only one. There is not at this day a Chriſtian church in the world, but what uſes in part of their ſervice, if not throughout it, forms of human compoſition; except that of Scotland, which had one immediately upon the Reformation, though it afterwards fell into diſuſe; and the diſſenters from our own, who notwithſtanding, many of them ſing in their aſſemblies hymns that are forms of human compoſition, without ſcruple. Yet if extempore prayers be required, extempore praiſes are too. For it is equally ſaid, *I will pray with the Spirit*, and, *I will ſing with the Spirit.*

* 1 Theſſ. v. 19.

† Numb. vi. 22, 23 &c. x. 35, 36 Deut. xxi. 7, 8. xxvi. 13. ‡ Luke xi. 2.

It may be replied indeed, that ſuppoſing forms of praye lawful, they are not however expedient. But if that be all, ſo long as the vaſtly greater, and the ruling part think otherwiſe, ought not the reſt to acquieſce? Is it not much leſs expedient to make a ſeparation and diviſion in the church, when Chriſt and his apoſtles have ſo ſtrongly preſcribed unity and ſubmiſſion?

But why are forms of prayer inexpedient? It is argued, that they cannot be altered according to circumſtances, which extempore prayers may. And, with reſpect to private devotion, the argument is ſo far of weight, that though even in this, forms well choſen are excellent directions, yet no one ſhould confine himſelf cloſely to them, when his condition, ſpiritual or temporal, requires him to depart from them: but ſhould omit, or add, or vary, as he perceives occaſion; in which he may well hope, that God's holy Spirit will guide him, ſo far as is needful. But the circumſtances of whole congregations, taken together, are in the main almoſt always the ſame: and therefore may be expreſſed in the ſame words. Beſides, public offices make a ſtated proviſion for the more uſual accidents that happen: and public authority provides for the reſt occaſionally, from time to time. Indeed, an eſtabliſhed liturgy doth not allow the caſes of private perſons or families, or the ſituation, real or ſuppoſed, of national affairs, to be enlarged on to God, at the diſcretion of the miniſter: a thing never neceſſary, and ſeldom proper. It is very ſufficient, that they who deſire the reſt of the aſſembly to join with them in petitions or thankſgivings on fit ſubjects, relating to themſelves, have opportunity afforded them of ſignifying their deſire: and that general expreſſions in the ſervice may be applied more eſpecially to particular purpoſes by each member in his own mind, as he conceives there is need. If theſe things be carefully done, forms of prayer will be found not ſo often defective perhaps in the matter of uncommon and extraordinary wants or mercies, as extempore prayers in what is far more neceſſary, expreſſing common and ordinary ones.

But ſome inſiſt, that whatever may be ſaid, they experience, that forms do not edify, and excite devotion. And this may be true, while they are unaccuſtomed to them, and come with prejudice againſt them. But would they make trial of them for ſome time, with a ſerious endeavour of receiving benefit

nefit from them, they would not fail to find that true ſpirit of piety raiſed by them in their own hearts, of which we hope they would ſee many inſtances in their fellow-worſhippers. It is true, a form doth not afford the entertainment of novelty. But that hath nothing to do with devotion. The hearer may be highly delighted, the ſpeaker highly admired: and all this may be mere amuſement of the fancy, and no prayer in reality offered up by him, who is beſt pleaſed with it. What alone deſerves that name, is a reverent application to God, from a deep ſenſe of our neceſſities and bleſſings, and his power and goodneſs: which a form deliberately precompoſed by the joint counſels of a number of perſons, whom the public wiſdom hath choſen for that end, is ſurely more likely both to excite, and to expreſs fitly, than the haſty produce of each private miniſter's invention; eſpecially as he is expected by his people to vary even this continually, though it be for the worſe.

One man will doubtleſs excel another in this way: and ſome perhaps may, really or ſeemingly, ſurpaſs at ſome times the public forms. But what multitudes would there be, who, through inability, careleſſneſs, want of memory, diffidence, or imprudence, would fall vaſtly ſhort of them, were every miniſter in the nation to uſe, every time he officiates, a new prayer of his own deviſing upon the ſpot? How often doth it happen, were we to know the truth, amongſt the ſmall number of our Diſſenters, that the perſon praying heſitates and is at a loſs, omits things neceſſary or uſeful, expreſſes himſelf obſcurely, improperly, irreverently, works himſelf into geſtures and accents by no means edifying, not to ſay worſe? All which muſt grievouſly hurt the devotion of thoſe, who deſire to pay God a *reaſonable ſervice* *; and bring thoughts into their minds, extremely unſuitable to the work in which they are engaged. Then what danger is there in this way, that men may fill their public addreſſes to Heaven with their own private, it may be abſurd and pernicious, notions and opinions: that national prayers may change, like faſhions and fancies, and the faith of Chriſtians change along with them; which the weight and authority of an eſtabliſhed liturgy greatly contributes to keep ſtedfaſt, and preſerve from noxious errors? What

* Rom. xii. 1.

What danger is there alſo, that perſons, either by ill deſign, or ill judging zeal, may mix their intereſts, their paſſions, their party-attachments of various kinds, with the requeſts and thankſgivings, which they utter in the name of the congregation; may inflame one part of a neighbourhood, one part of their fellow-ſubjects, againſt another; ſtir up ſome to miſchief, under colour of its being the cauſe of God; and, by ſo doing, make his worſhip abhorred by the reſt? I am far from charging the body of thoſe amongſt us, who uſe extempore prayer, with being guilty of theſe things now. I am only repreſenting, what evils a more general uſe of it would be likely to produce, eſpecially in times of public diſcord. Indeed moſt of them, if not all, it formerly hath produced: and preventing them is much eaſier, and every way better, than puniſhing them.

But ſuppoſing theſe inconveniences avoided, another, very conſiderable, would remain. Let their diſlike of forms be ever ſo great, the words of their miniſter in praying are as abſolutely a form to them for the time, as the words of a national liturgy: but with this unhappy difference, that his expreſſions being continually varied, poſſibly the moſt judicious, at leaſt the ſlower and more ignorant, may often doubt of their meaning; and the ſcrupulous of their fitneſs: and though, upon conſideration, they ſhould be ſatisfied, yet he in the mean while is gone on to ſomething elſe. And thus they may follow after him through the whole of a prayer, and be able to overtake and really join with him in but a ſmall part of it: whereas a form may always be examined beforehand; and when it is once underſtood and found to be right, our judgement and affections will go together in the uſe of it, without let or hindrance; and we ſhall be edified, not in imagination, but reality.

Upon the whole, the reaſons for a public liturgy are ſo ſtrong, that Calvin, the moſt univerſally eſteemed by our diſſenting brethren of all the reformers, in a letter to the protector of England, under Edward VI. hath theſe words. "*As to a form of prayer and of eccleſiaſtical rites, I highly approve that it ſhould be certain, from which it may not be lawful for any miniſter to depart: as well in conſideration of the weakneſs and ignorance of ſome, as that it may more plainly appear, how our churches agree amongſt themſelves; and laſtly, that a ſtop*

a ſtop may be put to the giddineſs of thoſe, who affect novelties."

Still I am ſenſible, that ſome of the arguments, which I have urged againſt devotions compoſed by the miniſter, may ſeem to lie equally againſt ſermons compoſed by him; and to require, that inſtruction be in a conſtant form, as well as prayer. But, beſides that one hath been the *cuſtom of the churches of God**, the other not; prayer is the voice of the people to their heavenly Father; and ſhould therefore be preſerved, with ſingular caution, from every thing, which they ought not to ſay, or may not immediately comprehend or approve; elſe, in ſuch parts of the ſervice, either they do not pray at all, or they pray amiſs. But preaching is the voice of the miniſter to the people, which they may weigh and judge of at their leiſure: and even ſhould they fail of learning their duty from thence, they may learn it from a much higher authority, the leſſons of ſcripture read to them. Further, where a fixed form of worſhip is appointed, inſtruction may be left at liberty more ſafely; becauſe it will be obſerved, if the latter contradicts the former: and alſo very uſefully, becauſe a much greater variety of things is requiſite to be ſaid to the people in ſermons, than is needful for them to ſay to Heaven in their prayers. But how proper ſoever it may be to have ſome form, they, who diſſent from us, apprehend there are ſuch great imperfections and faults in the eſtabliſhed form, that if they muſt *pray with the ſpirit and with the underſtanding*, they muſt not pray by that. Now, imperfections will be found in every thing human: and if theſe be a ſufficient objection againſt our prayers, it will hold againſt their own and all prayers, excepting that of our bleſſed Lord. From every thing unlawful we are ready to prove that our ſervice book is intirely free. But the faults of extempore devotions, which are different in every congregation, and every time of meeting in the ſame congregation, eaſily eſcape the notice of ſuch as are prejudiced in their favour, who alone hear them; and when obſerved, it is only by a few, and they are ſoon forgotten: while thoſe that are charged on a public printed liturgy, lie open conſtantly, year after year, to the cenſure of every one. And were it poſſible, that the ſeveral prayers offered up, in any one day, in the ſeveral diſſenting aſſemblies of this kingdom, could be written down;

* 1 Cor. xi. 16.

down; and examined half ſo narrowly for a ſhort ſpace, as ours have been for two centuries together: can it be imagined, that many times more and worſe omiſſions and impropriеties would not be found, in almoſt every one of them, than they have pretended to find in our common prayer? Still we are far from ſaying, it is incapable of any alteration for the better. Yet this we muſt ſay, that moſt of the alterations, propoſed by ſome perſons, have been thought by others, every way their equals, if not ſuperiors, by no means to be amendments. And as eminent a nonconformiſt as ever was, Mr Baxter, hath long ſince owned, that almoſt every church on earth hath a worſe liturgy than ours.

There hath indeed been *a railing accuſation* *, even of Popery, brought againſt it: though it was firſt compiled, then reviewed and approved, by Confeſſors and Martyrs for the Proteſtant cauſe; and ſeveral articles of Popery are as flatly contradicted in it, as can be. Some parts of it, we acknowledge, were in the Romiſh offices before: but not one tenth of the whole, as a very diligent perſon hath computed†. Moſt of this tenth part alſo was in much ancienter offices, before the Romiſh corruptions were introduced. And had it not; as even theſe prayers are intirely free from thoſe corruptions, where can be the harm of uſing them? Had our Reformers rejected them, they would have been in reality never the farther diſtant from the papiſts. And by retaining them, they had a proſpect of bringing many of the papiſts over to themſelves: by ſhewing, that they did not act from paſſion and prejudice, but reaſon and conſideration; that they reſpected the ancient offices and uſages of the purer ages of the church, and departed only from modern abuſes and errors.

It hath alſo been alledged, that we wear the habits of the Papiſts in offering up theſe prayers. But indeed, though it were no way material if we did, ours are very different from theirs. And if wearing any, which are not in common uſe, be condemned, what cauſe is there for it? why may not ſacred, as well as civil offices of dignity and importance, be made ſomewhat more ſolemn by veſtments appropriated to them? The fitneſs of it hath been confeſſed by the conſtant practice of mankind, and particularly of the Chriſtian church in early ages,

* Jude ver. 9. † Dr. Bennet on the common-prayer App. 1.

ages, and indeed of our Diſſenting miniſters themſelves; who change their dreſs a little, when they officiate. And where is the harm, if we change ours a little more? Though, after all, if the wearing of ſuch garments by us of the clergy were a fault, it would be intirely our own fault: and ſeeing us wear them could ſurely hurt no body.

But beſides theſe general objections, there are ſeveral made againſt particular paſſages, which ought to be confuted. This therefore I purpoſe, God willing, to do in a proper number of diſcourſes, on all the ſtated offices of our Liturgy: and not only to vindicate what is blamed, but explain alſo what too many may poſſibly not underſtand, and direct your notice to what may not be ſufficiently obſerved. All theſe things will very well come under the head, of which I promiſed at firſt to treat.

II. That we ſhould be very ſolicitous rightly to apprehend the ſenſe and fitneſs of what we ſay and do in God's preſence. For though cenſuring without reaſon is worſe, yet eſteeming without reaſon is not the part of wiſe men. And ſome perhaps are mighty zealous for our Liturgy, who yet know but very imperfectly, what good reaſon they have to be zealous for it. Indeed, amongſt many advantages of public forms of prayer, there ſeems to be one diſadvantage; that the words of them being in the main continually the ſame, and thus becoming well known and familiar, we often hear them, and even ſpeak our ſhare of them, with ſcarce any attention to them. But then it is equally true, that we often hear ſermons, tho' they are new to us, with juſt as little regard; and therefore ſhould be likely very ſoon to hear extempore prayers alſo with no leſs negligence: which fault our Liturgy is in ſeveral reſpects peculiarly calculated to prevent, as I ſhall hereafter ſhew you. But ſtill the danger is great enough, to demand our utmoſt care to guard againſt it. For however good our public offices are in themſelves, they convey no good to us, farther than we comprehend the import of them, and mind it: which, the better they are, the more they deſerve from us. And, on the other hand, were they ever ſo mean, this would be no excuſe for omitting to get all the benefit we could from them; but a powerful motive, though a very unhappy one, to endeavour it moſt earneſtly. Yet thinking them defective and

blameable where they are not, or to a degree in which they are not, as multitudes have done, will naturally diſcompoſe, or deaden at leaſt, our minds in the uſe of them: and therefore, ſhould be avoided, as far as it can. Now, perſons may indeed by their own private conſideration enter very competently, both into the meaning and the grounds of moſt things contained in the Liturgy. They, who are able to purchaſe a few books, may likewiſe receive much additional information from the ſeveral very uſeful paraphraſes and commentaries upon it, that are extant. And they are much to blame, if they wilfully neglect either of theſe things. But ſtill many cannot, and others are not likely to do them. To ſuch therefore I ſhall attempt to give ſome inſtruction concerning the ſervice, in which we join ſo often. The fewer need it, the better: but thoſe who do, it is of importance to aſſiſt. For with the more underſtanding we pray, with the more pleaſure and earneſtneſs we ſhall pray. And as on our praying, as we ought, depends our obtaining God's grace and bleſſing; ſo on that depends our only true comfort in this world, and our eternal happineſs in the next.

SERMON

SERMON XCIII.

RELIANCE ON THE SPIRIT OF GOD, UNITED WITH A PROPER RESPECT TO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING, IN OUR ADDRESSES TO THE ALMIGHTY.

1 COR. xiv. 15.

—I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the underſtanding alſo: I will ſing with the Spirit, and I will ſing with the underſtanding alſo.

FROM theſe words I have propoſed to diſcourſe on the two following ſubjects:

I. That good Chriſtians are aſſiſted by the Holy Ghoſt, in offering up their petitions and praiſes to God. *I will pray with the Spirit: I will ſing with the Spirit.*

II. That we ſhould be very ſolicitous rightly to apprehend the ſenſe and fitneſs of what we ſay and do in his preſence. *I will pray, I will ſing, with the underſtanding alſo.*

The former of theſe heads I have finiſhed: and, after proving its truth, I made it my chief endeavour to prove further, that this aid from above is not ſuch, as to afford any argument againſt uſing public forms of prayer; of which I ſhewed you both the lawfulneſs and the expediency: anſwering, at the ſame time, ſome general objections againſt our own eſtabliſhed form; but reſerving the more particular ones for the ſecond head: under which I promiſed to vindicate the principal things, which have been blamed in the ſtated offices of our Liturgy; to explain ſuch as may ſeem hard to underſtand, or liable to be miſunderſtood; and direct your atten-

tion to ſuch, as you may not otherwiſe obſerve ſufficiently. To this I ſhall now proceed, following the order of the book.

But it will be proper firſt to take notice of the laudable cuſtom, that every one, who comes to join in the devotions of our church, ſhould perform at his entrance into his place, a ſhort preparatory act of worſhip in private. Now this, as well as every thing elſe, ought to be done *with underſtanding:* not to be an unmeaning formality, in ignorant compliance with common practice; but a ſerious addreſs to God, that he would enable and incline us to attend in ſuch manner to what we are about to hear, and ſay, and do, that we may honour and pleaſe him, edify our fellow-worſhippers, benefit and finally ſave our own ſouls. For which purpoſe, either theſe very words, which I have mentioned, may be uſed; or any others of the like import, choſen by ourſelves; or, as perhaps is more uſual, thoſe expreſſive and excellent ones, that conclude the 19th pſalm: *Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of heart, be acceptable in thy ſight, O Lord, my ſtrength, and my Redeemer.* Only, whatever our expreſſions are, we ſhould be extremely careful not to make ſo very bad a beginning, as to put up this previous requeſt either thoughtleſsly or inſincerely. And the ſame care ſhould employ our minds throughout the whole. For that end, we ſhould avoid, as much as we can, all needleſs, but abſolutely all light and ludicrous converſation, even before the ſervice begins. And after it is begun, the fewer of the more tranſient intercourſes of civility are exchanged, the better. For ſurely they make a very unſuitable mixture with the awful words, which we are hearing, or perhaps repeating, at the ſame time: and muſt in ſome degree take off our attention from them. Nor will it be a leſs hindrance of our devotion, to remark over curiouſly, what other perſons are preſent, what appearance they make, or how they behave. Let not theſe directions, I intreat you, either give offence, or be deſpiſed. Very good people, I fear the very beſt of us all, tranſgreſs them inadvertently, more or leſs. But a moment's reflection will ſhew any one, that there is great propriety in obſerving them: and they will experience more advantage from it, than perhaps they expect.

Our ſervice begins, as did that of the primitive church*, with

* Sacerdos ante Orationem, Præfatione premiſſa parat Fratrum mentes. Cypr. de Orat. Dom.

with a preface, to diſpoſe more completely the minds of the congregation to a reverent performance of the duty, on which they are entering: according to that precept of the ſon of Sirach, *Before thou prayeſt, prepare thyſelf**. And this preface is compoſed of ſentences of ſcripture, with an exhortation grounded upon them. Nothing can ſo effectually awaken us to a pious frame of ſoul, as the words of God, ſpeaking to us. And the words, here uſed, are very prudently ſelected. They all relate to repentance and confeſſion of ſins: which naturally ſtands firſt in the devotions of guilty creatures, as we all are. Till we feel a genuine ſorrow for having offended God, and come to intreat earneſtly the pardon, which is offered us through Chriſt, he cannot accept us: and when we do, that will qualify us for every other part of his worſhip.

In theſe texts, (you may turn to them in your prayer-books, and go through them along with me) we are plainly taught the nature of true penitence: that *the wicked muſt* both *turn away from his wickedneſs*, and *do that*, which the *law* enjoins as *right, to ſave his ſoul alive:* that we muſt not only *acknowledge our tranſgreſſions* with our tongues, but have them *ever before* the eyes of our minds, to keep us humble and cautious; on which we may pray, in faith of being heard, that God will treat us with the ſame kindneſs, as if he *hid his face from* ſeeing our *ſins*, or *blotteth* them *out* from his memory: that he requires from us, neither the fanciful *ſacrifices* of ſuperſtition, nor the expenſive ones of the Moſaic diſpenſation; but that of *a ſpirit contrite* with filial ſorrow, and *broken* to univerſal obedience; not outward expreſſions of vehement paſſion, as *rending the garments*, but a *heart* rent and penetrated with a juſt ſenſe of what we have done amiſs: that on ſuch a change within we ſhall find him, not only *ſlow to anger* for what is paſt, and *ready to repent him of the evil* which he was bringing upon us, but bountiful and gracious for the time to come; *though we have* deliberately *rebelled againſt him* heretofore, and ſtill too often inconſiderately neglect to *obey his voice, and walk in his laws:* that we have cauſe to be willing, and even deſirous, that he ſhould *correct* us, when he ſees it expedient; but to beg he would do it *with* that mild and merciful *judgment*, which he exerciſes towards his children,

not

* Eccluſ. xviii. 23.

not with anger, as his enemies, which would *bring us* to final deſtruction: that repentance is abſolutely and immediately neceſſary for us; for *the kingdom of heaven is at hand*; the hour, when we ſhall, each of us, be admitted into it or excluded out of it for ever, draws very near, and how near we know not: that therefore we muſt reſolve to *ariſe and go to our heavenly Father* without delay, and acknowledge our unworthineſs *to be called his ſons*: that whatever we may be in our own eyes, or the opinion of our fellow-creatures, were we to undergo a human trial only; yet if God *enter into judgment with us, in his ſight ſhall no man living be juſtified*: that therefore to extenuate our faults, and *ſay* or imagine, *that we have no ſin*, or but little, would be a fatal *ſelf-deceit*, and a proof againſt us, that we know not, or own not, the *truth* of our caſe: but if we honeſtly recall to ourſelves, and *confeſs* to God the errors of our paſt life, not only his mercy, but his *faithfulneſs and juſtice* to his promiſes will induce him, both to *forgive us* the guilt of *our ſins*, and *to cleanſe us from* the defilement, and deliver us from the dominion, of *all unrighteouſneſs*.

It is true, but few of theſe ſentences are uſually read at the ſame time: but it will be very beneficial for ſuch as come ſoon enough, to meditate on them all before the ſervice begins.

The firſt words of the exhortation, *Dearly beloved brethren*, expreſs very ſtrongly and properly the good will and tender regard, which the miniſters of God's word ſhould have for their people: who ſhould in return receive their admonitions meekly and thankfully, ſince they *ſpeak* to them *the truth in love* *.

A following part of the exhortation reminds us, that *altho' we ought at all times*, even in our private ſupplications, *humbly to acknowledge our ſins before God; yet ought we moſt chiefly ſo to do, when we aſſemble and meet together*. Our Saviour hath laid a peculiar ſtreſs on joint prayers; and made more eſpecial promiſes to thoſe petitions, which his diſciples put up in common †: both to unite them cloſely in mutual affection, by the mutual benefits they receive at each other's requeſt; and to encourage a practice, which he foreſaw would prove

ſo

* Eph. iv. 15. † Matth. xviii. 20.

ſo powerful a means, both of their own edification, and the converſion of others. We have reaſon therefore to entertain a much higher eſteem, than many do, of the advantages to be obtained from conſtancy in public worſhip. But then, the more we expect from it, with the more care we muſt qualify ourſelves for what we expect: elſe we ſhall certainly be diſappointed. And as penitent confeſſion in the name of Chriſt is the great qualification for pardon and every mercy; and each one's example, in the church, of that or the contrary, muſt have a good or bad effect on thoſe around him, we ſhould endeavour, if there be room for any difference, to be more than ordinarily humble and fervent there: Yet we are in danger of being leaſt ſo, unleſs we look well to our ways, and diligently *keep our foot when we go to the houſe of God* *.

In the next words, after theſe, the ſeveral main branches of worſhip, following confeſſion, are expreſſed. And nearly the ſame order is obſerved in the ſervice, as in the exhortation. *We render thanks* to God *and ſet forth his praiſe*, in the pſalms and hymns; *hear his moſt holy word*, in the leſſons; *and aſk thoſe things, which are requiſite and neceſſary*, in the prayers.

The concluſion of this preface, *wherefore I pray and beſeech you, to accompany me with a pure heart*, that is, a ſincere one, *to the throne of the heavenly grace*, agrees intirely in ſenſe, and partly in words, with that pathetic declaration of St Paul: *As though God did beſeech you by us, we pray you in Chriſt's ſtead, be ye reconciled to God* †.

The *confeſſion* is directed *to be ſaid of the whole Congregation, after the miniſter*. If this be done by each perſon, as is alſo directed, *with an humble voice*, he will give no diſturbance to others: and every one muſt experience, that what he ſaith, on this occaſion, with his own mouth, is brought more home to his ſoul, becomes more perſonal and affecting, than if he had ſilently aſſented to it, when ſaid for him. And as it is a very uſeful, ſo it is a very old cuſtom ‡; revived in our church, after being laid aſide by the church of Rome; who begin their ſervice with an act of humiliation by the prieſt alone, in which the people have no ſhare.

Another direction is, that the confeſſion be ſaid, *all kneeling*. And

* Eccluſ v. 1. † 2 Cor. v. 20. ‡ Baſil, Ep. lxiii.

And that poſture in prayer, eſpecially in this part, hath not only ancient authority, but nature itſelf, on its ſide: and doth ſo ſtrongly, both expreſs and excite inward humility, that it ſhould never be omitted wilfully, or negligently, in favour of eaſe and idolence: conſiderations, very unworthy of notice at ſuch a time. Still they, whoſe infirmities will not permit them to be on their knees without pain or hurt, may doubtleſs allowably ſtand, or even ſit; for God *will have mercy, and not ſacrifice**. And further: As in many full congregations this rule cannot be obſerved by every one, without taking up more room, than can with convenience be ſpared; certainly the ſuperior rule, of doing *the things, wherewith one may edify another* †, binds us rather to be content with ſtanding, though a leſs eligible poſture, than exclude numbers of our fellow-Chriſtians from being tolerably accommodated for joining in worſhip with us. For kneeling, though greatly preferable is not preſcribed as indiſpenſably neceſſary. *The children of Iſrael*, we read in the book of *Nehemiah* ‡, *were aſſembled with faſting*; and, probably for the reaſon juſt mentioned, *ſtood and confeſſed their ſins*. The penitent publican did not fail of being accepted, though he *ſtood*, when he ſaid, *God be merciful to me a ſinner* §. And on ſome days the early Chriſtians did not kneel at all.

In the firſt words of the confeſſion, we apply to God as our Father: the author of our being, and therefore intitled to all honour and ſervice from us; the adopter of us, after our forfeiture, into his family again through Jeſus Chriſt, and therefore intitled to have it paid him with double gratitude. We acknowledge him Almighty, either to protect or puniſh; and therefore to be obeyed from intereſt, as well as duty: we acknowledge him to be *moſt merciful*; and therefore, in the higheſt degree, unfit to have been offended, and fit to have pardon aſked of him.

The expreſſion, *we have erred and ſtrayed from thy ways, like loſt ſheep*, is taken from ſcripture. *I have gone aſtray, like a loſt ſheep: ſeek thy ſervant* ‖. Again: *All we, like ſheep, have gone aſtray; we have turned every one to his own way: and the Lord hath laid on him*, on Chriſt, *the iniquity of us all*

* Matth. ix. 13. xii. 7. † Rom. xiv. 9. ‡ Neh. ix. 1, 2. § Luke xviii. 13. ‖ Pſal. cxix. 176.

*all**. But to underſtand the full propriety of the phraſe, it muſt be obſerved, that both the likelihood of ſtraying was much greater, and the conſequences of it much more fatal, in open countries, full of wild beaſts, as thoſe of the Eaſt were, than in ours. And ſuch a *great and terrible wilderneſs* †, in the ſpiritual ſenſe, is this world.

It hath been objected, that our confeſſion is too general. But it comprehends all ſins, both of omiſſion and commiſſion. The particulars, each perſon's conſcience, if it be duly tender, will repreſent to itſelf, as far as is needful, or well can be, in public. And was every ſin, that men can fall into, expreſſed by name, the catalogue would be too long; and ſuch, that many, (it is to be hoped) could not with truth join in the whole: nor would it be proper, that they who had, and had not, been guilty, ſhould confeſs all the ſame things; or that thoſe about us ſhould perceive, which we did confeſs.

It hath been further objected, that in our appointed form, there is no acknowledgement of the original corruption of our nature by the fall. Nor is there an explicit one, even in the prayer of our bleſſed Lord. But ſurely when we ſay, that *we have followed too much the devices and deſires of our own hearts*, it may well be part of our meaning, that they are from the firſt irregular and depraved.

The words, *and there is no health in us*, beſides that they alſo profeſs our inward frame throughout to be more or leſs diſordered, ſignify too, that we have no power of our own, either to cure the ſpiritual diſeaſes, of which we are already ſick, or to prevent the attacks of future ones. And therefore we apply to God, that he would *heal our ſouls* ‡: whom alſo, in the concluſion, we implicitly promiſe, that whatever ammendment ſhall be produced in us by the means he preſcribes, we will give the glory of it, not to ourſelves, but to his holy name: *who hath bleſſed us with all ſpiritual bleſſings in Chriſt, to the praiſe of the glory of his grace* §.

After the confeſſion follows the abſolution: which ſome have apprehended to be a very popiſh form. But indeed neither of them is taken out of any popiſh ſervice. On the contrary, both of them appeared for the firſt time in the ſecond edition of King Edward the Sixth's Common-prayer-book:

* Iſa. liii. 6. † Deut. i. 19. ‡ Pſal. xli. 4. § Eph. i. 3, 6.

which was made with the advice of foreign, and even presbyterian proteſtants. Nay, this abſolution was directly levelled againſt popery. For the popiſh abſolutions were given in private, ſeparately to each particular perſon, poſitively and without reverſion, in the name of the prieſt: and this is given in public, to all perſons at once, conditionally, if they are truly penitent, in the name of God. The people were miſled by the former abſolutions to a groundleſs truſt in ſacerdotal power: and would have taken offence, if after their confeſſion none had been ſubjoined. This therefore was drawn up, to be uſed over them: which tends very powerfully to comfort men, but can never miſlead them; becauſe it leads them to truſt only in God's mercy; and in that no otherwiſe, than if they *truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel,* proving their ſincerity by their reformation: on which terms alone he hath *given his miniſters power and commandment to pronounce to his people the abſolution and remiſſion of their ſins.*

And as none, but his miniſters are commiſſioned to make this ſolemn proclamation of pardon on his behalf: it is fitly ordered, that none ſhould ſhare with them in publiſhing it, by repeating it along with them. And you will obſerve, that wherever in the ſervice the congregation are not directed to ſpeak, but the miniſter only, their ſpeaking the ſame words low, as many perſons inconſiderately do, removes only part of the impropriety, and leaves the reſt. On this therefore, and the like occaſions, you will remember, that your buſineſs is only to hearken and aſſent with ſilent reverence: of which reverence, in the preſent caſe, continuing on your knees, in token of your humble thankfulneſs to God, is undoubtedly a ſuitable expreſſion.

After the above-mentioned declaration, immediately follows an admonition to *pray for repentance and God's Holy Spirit:* which may ſeem perhaps needleſs and unaccountable; conſidering, that we have juſt been profeſſing to exerciſe repentance, and have been aſſured of God's forgiveneſs upon it, of which the gift of his Spirit is a conſequence. But if it be conſidered alſo, that we are to repent, not only before, but after pardon; and even the more deeply for the mercy and love ſhewn in our pardon, elſe it would be juſtly revoked; and that the continuance of God's Spirit with us depends on the continuance of our ſupplications for his preſence, which

will

will alſo procure us greater degrees of it; there will be found no weight in this objection.

At the end of the abſolution, and of every prayer, the people are directed to ſay, *Amen:* which means, it is true; we do ſincerely deſire, or ſincerely affirm, what hath been ſaid. This was the practice of the Jewiſh church: it was alſo that of the Chriſtian in the apoſtles days. *How ſhall he, that occupieth the room of the unlearned, ſay Amen, at thy giving of thanks, ſeeing he underſtandeth not what thou ſayeſt* *? And the ſubſequent eccleſiaſtical writers ſhew, that it uſed to be pronounced audibly and fervently: each expreſſing his own faith or deſire, and animating that of his fellow-worſhippers. We ſhould therefore by no means neglect to give this proof, amongſt others, that we not only hear the ſervice with attention, but join in it with earneſtneſs.

After the confeſſion and abſolution, comes the Lord's Prayer: it being a very proper time to addreſs God in that form, which our Saviour taught his diſciples, when we have approved ourſelves his real diſciples, by repentance of ſins, and faith in the goſpel-offers of mercy. And as he directs, *When ye pray, ſay, our Father, &c.* our liturgy accordingly directs, that every one ſhould ſay it. For ſo they did in the primitive church: in which it was called, the daily, the appointed, the public, the common prayer of Chriſtians. Further: as our bleſſed Redeemer delivered it twice, and we ſee it in St Matthew with the doxology, *for thine is the kingdom,* &c. and in St Luke, without it; we ſometimes uſe it one way, ſometimes the other.

And now, having preſumed, in theſe ſolemn words, to claim God for our Father through Chriſt; for though his name is not mentioned in this prayer, it is to be underſtood by us in every article of it; we now proceed to vent the joy and thankfulneſs belonging to ſuch a privilege: which I obſerved to you before, is the ſecond part of our public ſervice, as it was in the ancient church; where, St Baſil informs us †, the people, after confeſſion, roſe from prayer, and went on to pſalmody. But to make the tranſition more natural and be-

 neficial,

* 1 Cor. xiv. 16. † Ep. lxiii.

neficial, we firſt beg, that God would permit and aſſiſt us, unworthy as we are, to pay him this homage. *O Lord, open thou our lips: and our mouth ſhall ſhew forth thy praiſe:* which are the words of David, in his chief penitential pſalm, the fifty-firſt. Guilt had ſhut up his mouth from the utterance of chearful ſounds, till humiliation and aſſurance of pardon gave him that liberty of ſpeech again, which, in his expreſſions, we pray it may give us. And ſome of the earlieſt liturgies uſed the ſame verſe for the ſame purpoſe: as they did likewiſe that, which follows here, and which is found in two different pſalms *, *O God, make ſpeed to ſave us: O Lord, make haſte to help us:* it being ſeaſonable at all times to requeſt, that as our danger is continual, he would be continually at hand, to *ſave* us from ſin, and *help us* in our duty; eſpecially when we are juſt advancing to ſo ſublime a duty, and one which requires ſuch purity of heart. *For praiſe is not ſeemly in the mouth of a ſinner* † but *it becometh well the juſt to be thankful* ‡.

The way then being thus prepared, and having qualified ourſelves with holy David to ſay, *my heart is ready, my heart is ready, I will ſing and give praiſe* §, we riſe up from our knees, and ſtand upon our feet. [c] For ſo we read, that when *the prieſts and Levites praiſed the Lord, all Iſrael ſtood* ‖ And we begin this good work with that ſummary of all our praiſes, to which we ſhall often return in the courſe of them, and in which we ſhall conclude them; *glory be* aſcribed *to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghoſt: as it was in the beginning* of time by angels, *when the morning ſtars ſang together, and all the ſons of God ſhouted for joy* ¶; as it hath been ever ſince, by religious perſons in ſucceeding ages, according to the degree of their light; as it *is now*, by all the ſaints in earth and heaven, *and ever ſhall be*, not only throughout the preſent ſcene of things, by new Chriſtians riſing up in the place of thoſe who die or fall away, (whatever men or devils may do to prevent it) but after the final conſummation, when all are united into one general aſſembly: whoſe triumphant acclamations to our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sanctifier,

* Pſal. xl. 13. lxxi. † Eccluſ xv. 9. ‡ Pſal. xxxiii. 1.
§ Pſal. cviii. 1. ‖ 2 Chron. vii. 6. ¶ Job xxxviii. 7.

fier, ſhall reſound *world without end*, duration without period, in that bleſſed ſtate, which ſhall laſt to all eternity.

And now, having propoſed the unſpeakably great ſubject, that we are to celebrate, we invite each other to enter upon it more particularly: the miniſter ſaying, *praiſe ye the Lord*; which is the literal tranſlation of alleluiah, ſo often repeated in the Old Teſtament, in the New, in the liturgies of the univerſal Church: and the people anſwering, with joyful approbation, *the Lord's name be praiſed.*

Some indeed of our diſſenting brethern have thought, and ſo have ſome papiſts *, that dividing this, and other parts of the ſervice, as we do, between the prieſt and the congregation; and allowing the latter to make reſponſes; (which means anſwers) is permitting, not only laymen, but even women, againſt an expreſs prohibition of ſcripture, to encroach on the miniſterial office; makes a diſagreeable confuſed noiſe, and hinders many from underſtanding what is ſaid. But ſurely the office of the miniſter is ſufficiently diſtinguiſhed, as he preſides and leads, throughout the ſervice. And why ſhould not the people be ſuffered to follow him; and bear ſome part with their voices in praying, as well as the main part in ſinging? Not to ſay, that the principal article, in which they do bear a part is the pſalms for the day, which were deſigned to be ſung, where it could be done conveniently, as I wiſh it could every where. No ſcripture forbids the congregation to bear a part: that which forbids women to ſpeak in the church†, means only to forbid their giving inſtruction, or entering into queſtions or diſputations there. And St Paul commands us to *ſpeak to one another in pſalms and hymns and ſpiritual ſongs* ‡. Accordingly, primitive Chriſtians are known to have uſed this alternate manner in their public prayers and praiſes. And though, when the pſalms and hymns are ſpoken thus, and not ſung, their is nothing harmonious in the ſound, yet St John deſcribes the worſhip of the bleſſed above by the *voice of many waters, and of a great thunder* §; which is no unfit compariſon for the united anſwers of a large congregation. As to the other part of the objection, this method in reality creates no confuſion or difficulty at all. A very little practice will render

* See *Bingham*, l. xiv. c i. §. 13. † 1 Cor. xiv. 35. ‡ Eph. v. 19.
§ Rev. xiv. 2.

der it eaſy to any one that can read: even they who cannot read, may join in it, by attending to thoſe near them, or to the clerk: it makes a grateful variety, keeps attention awake, and enlivens devotion. In this manner then we glorify God: beginning always with the 95th Pſalm, as the whole Chriſtian church did in early ages, and as the nature of the pſalm recommends to us: it being a diſtinct invitation to the ſeveral duties of praiſe, prayer and hearing, with an awful warning of the danger of neglecting God, drawn from his judgments on the diſobedient Jews, unto whom *theſe things happened for enſamples, and they are written for our admonition**.

When we call him, in this pſalm, *the ſtrength of our ſalvation;* we mean, that by his power alone we can be ſaved from preſent and future evils. When we call him *a great King above all gods;* we mean, above all that have ever had that name aſcribed to them: the princes of the nations, the falſe deities of the heathen, Satan *the god of this world*†, and the holy angels in heaven. When we ſay, that *in his hands are all the corners of the earth, and the ſtrength of the hills is his alſo;* we mean, that his preſence and his influence extend to the remoteſt and moſt inacceſſible places; and there is none, where he cannot deliver or puniſh. When we call ourſelves *the people of his paſture, and the ſheep of his hand;* we own our Maker to be likewiſe our preſerver, ſupporter and director; who feeds our ſouls by his word and his grace, as well as our bodies with daily bread, and guides us mercifully through this world to a better. *To-day if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts,* is an affecting and alarming exhortation, that if we deſign ever to become his ſervants in earneſt, we ſhould hearken immediately to his continual calls; elſe, through a habit of diſobedience, our minds may grow callous, and *paſt feeling*‡. The words, *when your fathers tempted me,* which are put into the mouth of God himſelf, the Jews, (for whom firſt this pſalm was compoſed) were to underſtand literally, of their fathers according to the fleſh. But we are to take them of thoſe, who have gone before us in the profeſſion of religion: and whom we are not to reſemble in *tempting and proving* God; that is, doubting, and putting to unreaſonable trials,

* 1 Cor. x. 11 † 2 Cor. iv. 4. ‡ Eph. iv. 19. § Heb. iv. 9.

trials, his omnipotence, his goodneſs and truth: leſt, as the unbelieving Jews died in the wilderneſs, and ſo were excluded from the temporal reſt, which otherwiſe they would have enjoyed in the land of Canaan, we alſo be excluded from what is prefigured, that eternal *reſt*, which *remains for the people of God** in heaven.

At the end of this and each pſalm that we repeat, of whatever nature it may be, we add the ſame doxology, that we uſed at firſt: Glory being due to God for every thing he hath taught, and every thing he hath done, both in former times and preſent; for every affliction, as well as every enjoyment. And therefore we do well to obſerve the apoſtle's rule, of *giving thanks always, for all things, unto God and the Father, in the name of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt* †.

Then we proceed to rehearſe the pſalms, in proper portions, according to the days of the month: of which it will be needful to ſay much more, than there is now time to ſay. I ſhall therefore conclude with only remarking in general, that words of God's own inſpiring are ſurely the fitteſt to praiſe him in: which being ſo noble a duty, we ſhould take peculiar care to perform it in the moſt unexceptionable, judicious, and affectionate manner. *When you glorify the Lord, exalt him as much as you can; for even yet will he far exceed: and when you exalt him, put forth all your ſtrength, and be not weary; for you can never go far enough* ‡.

* Heb. iv. 9. † Eph. v. 20. ‡ Eccluſ. xliii. 30.

SERMON

SERMON XCIV.

RELIANCE ON THE SPIRIT OF GOD, UNITED WITH A PROPER RESPECT TO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING, IN OUR ADDRESSES TO THE ALMIGHTY.

1 COR. xiv. 15.

—I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the underſtanding alſo: I will ſing with the Spirit, and I will ſing with the underſtanding alſo.

HAVING undertaken firſt to ſhew the lawfulneſs and expediency of public liturgies; then to vindicate, explain, and point out ſuch things in our own, as are moſt liable to be cenſured, or not underſtood, or not ſufficiently obſerved: I have finiſhed the former head, and proceeded under the latter as far as the pſalms; which very juſtly make a principal part of the joint praiſes, that we offer up to God. For though ſeveral of them were compoſed on particular occaſions, yet they are plainly fitted for general uſe: and their inſertion into the canon of ſcripture proves them to be deſigned for it: the Jews anciently recited them in the temple, and do ſtill in their ſynagogues: the New Teſtament hath recommended them to Chriſtians; and the whole church hath ſung them ever ſince. Indeed the ſubject matter of them is very different: but thoſe of joy are much more numerous, than any other ſort: and all of them afford ground of praiſe at leaſt; the doctrinal, the exhortatory, the hiſtorical, as well as the reſt. Even the plaintive and petitionary miniſter cauſe of thankſgiving to him, who hath promiſed to hear, and ſupport, and deliver; and make *all things work together for good to them, that love him.*

him *. Glory therefore to the bleſſed three in One is a fit concluſion to every pſalm.

But in reading them it muſt be carefully obſerved, and may with moderate care be commonly diſtinguiſhed, in whoſe perſon the ſeveral ſentences are ſpoken. In ſome pſalms, or portions of pſalms, it is God or Chriſt, in others, wicked men, that ſpeak. Theſe we muſt repeat, as their ſayings: and none as our own, but what were intended for us. Even the words of the Pſalmiſt, if we are to adopt them, may frequently ſeem ſo unapplicable to the outward condition, or inward frame, of many in every congregation, that, if they attend to them, they cannot ſay them with truth. But moſt of them all good people may ſay even of themſelves ſingly, with much truth. For they have conſtantly enemies, temporal or ſpiritual. Afflictions more or leſs heavy, valuable mercies, and at times warm feelings of pious diſpoſitions: which, if not preſent, may be ſo recalled, and made their own again, as to be very ſincerely expreſſed to God. And what they cannot ſay in their own name ſeparately, they may truly ſay in the name of Chriſt's Church, of which they are members: and they ought, and ſurely do, bear ſome ſhare of the mercies and ſufferings, the fears and deſires of every part of it, in every ſtate. And as David, in ſome of the pſalms, takes on him the perſon of Chriſt; in others he ſeems to take that of his diſciples: and to ſpeak, not in any one particular character, but as repreſenting the whole body of believers. Or if there be any paſſages, which neither of theſe methods will ſuit; ſtill we may rehearſe them, as expreſſing the caſe of ſome eminent worthy of old times, and be affected by it accordingly: for we often are ſtrongly affected by the circumſtances, well deſcribed, not only of diſtant, but of imaginary perſons. We may conſider, as we go on, the likeneſs, or the difference, between his ſituation, his temper, and our own: and raiſe from it many reflections of ſympathy and caution, of humiliation, encouragement, and thankfulneſs. Thus, at leaſt, we may bring every thing we ſay home to ourſelves: and by ſo doing furniſh our minds with a moſt valuable ſtore of devout thoughts and language, perhaps for many future occaſions of our own or others. For the book of pſalms is ſo inexhauſtible a trea-

* Rom. viii. 28.

ſure of every branch of piety, that a more conſtant uſe of it, than of any other in the whole Bible, hath, with very juſt reaſon, been appointed in public forms of prayer, and recommended in private ones.

It may be objected, that in ſeveral of them David utters moſt bitter imprecations againſt his enemies: in which, to ſay nothing harſher, we cannot follow him: for the rule of the New Teſtament is, *Bleſs, and curſe not**. But indeed moſt, if not all, the places, which appear wiſhes of evil, may, according to the confeſſed import of the original, be underſtood only as predictions of it. Or, ſuppoſing them wiſhes, David might be directed by infinite wiſdom to pronounce them, even againſt the oppoſers of his reigning over Iſrael; who oppoſed, at the ſame time, the known decree of Providence. Repeating them in this view, ſolely as his, muſt be innocent: and ſtrongly ſuggeſt an important admonition, *not to fight againſt God*†. But perhaps in ſome of theſe, as well as other paſſages, he ſpeaks in the perſon of the whole church of God, againſt all its irreconcileable adverſaries, whoever they be. Such was Judas: to whom therefore the two moſt dreadful of theſe pſalms are applied, Acts i. 20. And, with the utmoſt tenderneſs to the whole of God's creation, we may and muſt deſire the overthrow of them, who obſtinately hate him and his laws. For though we ought much more to deſire the repentance, than the death of a ſinner, as he himſelf doth: yet, if they will not repent, we ought to think and ſpeak with approbation and ſatisfaction, (yet mixed with an awful concern,) of their puniſhments here, and ſentence hereafter: which laſt St Paul repreſents good perſons, as joining to pronounce: *Do ye not know, that the ſaints ſhall judge the world*‡?

It may be objected further, that however this be, the pſalms are unfit for our uſe on another account: they are full of Jewiſh notions and phraſes. But they were compoſed by the aid of the Holy Spirit, with a view to Chriſtian times: our Saviour appeals particularly to thoſe things, *which are written in the Pſalms concerning him*§, and they are many. Nor is the difficulty great, in applying the peculiarities of one diſpenſation to what anſwers them in the other: of underſtanding by the law, the doctrine of him, who came to fulfil it; by Jeruſalem and

* Rom. xii. 14. † Acts xxiii. 9. ‡ 1 Cor. vi. 2. § Luke xxiv. 44.

and Zion, the Chriſtian church; by the ſeveral ſacrifices, that of our bleſſed Lord, or of our own prayers and praiſes offered up in his name; by the altar, the holy table; by temporal enemies and deliverances, ſpiritual ones; and ſo of the reſt: thanking God, at the ſame time, that we have light afforded us, to ſee ſo much deeper into this and every book of the Old Teſtament, than they who wrote it.

Still there may be more paſſages than a few in the Pſalms, which many underſtand not. However, even theſe they may allowably read over, as undoubtedly they often do other things, in order and in hope to underſtand them: and by reading with attention, they will come gradually to underſtand more and more of them. But they would make this much eaſier to themſelves, by reading carefully in private ſome paraphraſe of the Pſalms, if they are able to procure one, along with them: ſuch as the larger of Dr Hammond, or rather of Biſhop Patrick, or the ſmaller of Dr Nicols or Mr Johnſon. The particular paſſages, which one or other may find obſcure to him, are too many to be explained from hence. But the darkeſt and leaſt edifying in appearance will, by the uſe of any of theſe authors, be perceived, either to have ſome one determined ſenſe of importance, or at leaſt to be capable of ſeveral ſuch.

And indeed all conſiderate Chriſtians will acknowledge the excellence of the pſalter in a good tranſlation. But ſome object againſt that, which we have in our prayer-books, as made in times of leſs learning and exactneſs, than the other in our bibles: which, being more correct, they conceive ought to be uſed inſtead of it. But indeed, as the latter is, in ſome places, juſter than the former; ſo is the former, in ſome, juſter than that. And it hath one general ground of preference; that, not rendering the words of the Hebrew ſo ſtrictly, it gives the ſenſe of them more intelligibly: notwithſtanding that a few expreſſions, and but very few, are become in the ſpace of 200 years, which have paſſed ſince it was made, leſs clear or proper, than they were at firſt. Indeed this old verſion hath here and there additions to what we now find in the original. But the only conſiderable one is taken from, if not warranted by, the New Teſtament: they are all harmleſs: they are moſt of them founded on authorities not contemptible, particularly on that of the very ancient

Latin interpreter, departing from which, without neceſſity, would have given occaſion of cavil to the Romaniſts. And as this tranſlation in our prayer-books was made by martyrs and confeſſors for the proteſtant religion, ſo it was with reaſon highly eſteemed by the people; and ſoon grew, by often repeating it, ſo familiar to them, that changing it for another, though ſomewhat better on the whole, would have been diſagreeable to them. Therefore the ſenſe of both being ſufficiently the ſame, (as any one, by comparing them, will be convinced;) the words, to which the congregation were accuſtomed, have been retained to this day.

It hath been objected farther, that, granting the uſe of this tranſlation to be juſtifiable, yet the manner, in which we uſe it, is not. For we read it on, juſt as the pſalms lie; and thus we blend together thoſe of joyful and thoſe of ſorrowful import, without diſtinction and without method; yet we cannot be ſuppoſed to vary our affections ſo quick, as this requires. But it ſhould be remembered, that on the principal ſtated faſts and feſtivals, and on all occaſional ones, pſalms proper to them are appointed, out of the common courſe. On days indeed which have nothing ſo particular in them, we follow the order in which they are ſet down. For we could not vary it, without omitting ſome of them, which none of them deſerve; or diſpoſing them in a way entirely new. Now what that ſhould be, would be very hard to ſettle: and whatever was done, at leaſt as many faults would be found then, as now. The preſent arrangement is certainly older than our Saviour's days: the public offices of the whole Chriſtian church have followed it from the very firſt account of them, that we have: and why ſhould we make alterations, only to raiſe perplexities? The pſalms are indeed miſcellaneous. But ſo are many other parts of ſcripture. The book of Proverbs is vaſtly more ſo. Yet no one objects againſt reading thoſe, as they lie. In truth, ſcarce a chapter of the Bible, or any author whatever, can be read, but what calls for variety of diſpoſitions and affections to be exerciſed, within a very ſmall compaſs. Even in a ſhort prayer is there not a great variety, if it be well conſidered? In poetry and muſic, theſe tranſitions are often extremely abrupt and ſudden, from one thing to its contrary in the higheſt degree. Yet the mind goes along with them very eaſily. Much more then may

may it do ſo, when prepared, as in the preſent caſe, by a previous knowledge of what is to come next, and long practice in the change. And if repeating the pſalms in courſe be right, we have certainly fixed a right period of this courſe, that of a month: whereas the church of Rome goes through them in a week, which is making one part of the ſervice too long; and the Greek church in twenty days, which is making it hard to find. On the whole then, let us but be careful, that our behaviour be as good in this branch of worſhip, as the regulation concerning it is: and notwithſtanding the unhappy diſadvantage of barely ſaying, what ought to be enlivened by the power of harmony; we may ſtill, through God's grace, be warmed and filled with his Spirit, while we *ſpeak to one another and ourſelves*, as the apoſtle directs, *in pſalms and hymns and ſpiritual ſongs, ſinging and making melody*, if not with our voices, yet *in our hearts, to the Lord* *.

After the pſalms, it hath long been cuſtomary for the organ, where one is uſed, to play for a ſhort time. And as inſtruments of muſic in Divine ſervice are certainly lawful (elſe they had not been appointed in the Jewiſh, or permitted in the ancient Chriſtian church †, or deſcribed in the Revelation as accompanying the praiſes of the bleſſed above;) ſo a little pauſe, for the uſe of this inſtrument, will not only give ſome reſpite and refreſhment to the congregation, and to the miniſter; but may be advantageouſly employed, either to reflect on what is paſt of the ſervice, or prepare our minds for what is to come. And therefore it ſhould not be filled up either by the performer with the lighter airs of muſic, inſtead of ſolemn ſtrains, and ſuch as may excite proper diſpoſitions, or by any of the congregation with needleſs diſcourſe, or ſuch private thoughts and imaginations, as blot out good impreſſions already made, and indiſpoſe us for receiving the like afterwards.

In the next place follows a leſſon, taken out of the Old Teſtament: and with this begins the third part of the office. That they, who are bleſſed with a Revelation from God, ſhould

* Eph. v. 19. Col. iii. 16.

† Ψαλμος εστιν η δια του οργανου της μουσικης μελωδια. Greg. Nyſſ. Tract. 2. in Pſalmos c. iii. §. 1. Ο ψαλμος λογος εστι μυστικος, οταν ευρυθμως κατα της αρμονικης λογους φερος το οργανον αρηται. Baſil in Pſ. 29. Suic. in voc.

ſhould read and hear it with reverence, when they aſſemble to worſhip him, is a plain dictate of reaſon and religion. Accordingly the *Jews had Moſes and the prophets in their ſynagogues of old time,* as the book of Acts informs us *. And ſo indeed do writers of their own, in the ſame age with it †: who boaſt of the practice, as a moſt uſeful and honourable diſtinction, peculiar to their nation, that the laws of life were thus publiſhed to all the people. The primitive Chriſtians, as one of the earlieſt apologiſts for them, Juſtin Martyr, tells us, read at their meetings, both the Jewiſh prophets, and the writings of the apoſtles in proper portions. And when the church of Rome had broken them into ſmall fragments, interrupted with other things; and had continued to read even theſe in Latin, after it was no longer underſtood: our church rectified both errors; and hath taken care that the Old Teſtament ſhould be gone through once a-year, and the New thrice. Only we omit ſome parts of the former; which are repetitions of what is related in other parts, or bare liſts of genealogies and families, or too myſtical and abſtruſe to be edifying in public; on which laſt account we omit alſo the book of Revelation, excepting two or three chapters: matters of ſuch difficulty being wiſely thought fitter for the private meditation and ſtudy of thoſe, who are qualified to engage in them.

The order, in which the books of both Teſtaments are read, is that in which they ſtand. Only in the Old, the prophet Iſaiah, containing the fulleſt predictions of Chriſt's coming and kingdom, is placed at the approach of his nativity: and in the New, the goſpels and Acts are the leſſons for the morning, and the epiſtles for the afternoon. In this manner we make proviſion for every day in the year: and hence one great recommendation of daily attendance on public prayers, (where there are opportunities for it) is, that by means of it we ſhall proceed regularly through the ſacred writings, and preſerve the due connexion of the ſeveral diſcoveries, made in them to man. But for the firſt leſſons on Sundays, thoſe chapters of the Old Teſtament are ſelected, which appeared to be moſt uſeful. The ſecond leſſons being from the New, there was no neceſſity, and little room, for choice. And to holydays ſuch portions of both are adapted, as beſt agree with the occaſion.

But

* Acts xiii. 27. xv. 21. † Joſeph contr. ap. l. 2. ſ. 18.

But here we are accuſed of ſetting mere human compoſitions on a level with the word of God, by taking part of our leſſons out of the Apocrypha: which alſo we are charged with frequently binding up in the ſame volume with our Bibles. But ſo we ſometimes do our prayer-books likewiſe: yet we never dreamed of equalling either to ſcripture. The articles of our church expreſsly diſtinguiſh the Apocrypha from it: the people of our church know the diſtinction. And that it may not fail to be known, they are marked at the top of every page with the name, Apocrypha; which means, hidden; and, on whatever account it was given to theſe books, belongs to them on this; that they are to be kept out of the way, and not produced as proof, when any point of doctrine or duty is in queſtion; whereas the canonical books are the canon or rule of faith and manners. The former therefore we read in the congregation, not as divine, but venerable for their antiquity, and the ſpirit of religion that breathes in them. Still ſome parts we paſs over, as leſs uſeful: ſome, for the errors or improprieties, which they contain: and ſome others, we own, require candid interpretations. But there ſeems to be ground for one ſuch interpretation, which will remove a good many objections at once: that ſome relations of things, which perhaps are not literally and hiſtorically true, poſſibly were never intended to be thought ſo; but written, like many other juſtly admired pieces, for admonitory fables or parables. That the doctrine of them in the main is excellent, and the narrations inſtructive, every one muſt own. They were quoted with reſpect in the firſt ages of Chriſtianity: they were read in public from very early ages: it would have given great and needleſs offence at the Reformation to have left them out entirely: and they are never appointed for the Lord's day: by which means, it may be, there are many perſons in every pariſh, who ſcarce ever heard an Apocryphal leſſon in their lives. At leaſt the ſecond leſſons are always canonical ſcripture: of which a great deal more is read, beſides the pſalms, (even in thoſe churches of ours, which have not week-day prayers,) than in any one congregation of the Diſſenters. And therefore they have no right to reproach us on the preſent head.

But ſuppoſing we ſhould, any of us, apprehend, that this, or any thing elſe, in the ſervice, mentioned or to be mentioned,

ed, might have been better ordered: yet we ſhould always think of the judgment of others with proper deference, and of our own with modeſty. And ſo long as nothing is required of us contrary to our duty, we ſhould remember, that our concern is much more to improve by every thing, than to object againſt any thing: by which laſt, unleſs done very diſcreetly, we may hinder, more than a little, our own edification, and that of others.

Let us therefore attend ſeriouſly to the leſſons read: but with diſtinguiſhed reverence to thoſe of ſcripture. We are admoniſhed in the beginning of the office, that one great end for which *we aſſemble and meet together*, is *to hear God's moſt holy word*. We pray, in the concluſion of it, *that the words, which we have heard with our outward ears, may be inwardly grafted in our hearts*. Both theſe places mean, not the ſermon principally, but the leſſons, the pſalms, the commandments, the epiſtles, the goſpels. The diſcourſes indeed, which we deliver to you from hence, we truſt, are agreeable to God's word: and we deſire you to judge of them by it. But heaven forbid, that you ſhall equal or prefer them to it: as you certainly appear to do, if you hearken to our ſayings, and not to his. Think, I intreat you, then, whether you are not faulty in this reſpect: whether you do not often let your thoughts wander, without endeavouring to prevent it; whether you do not ſometimes forget yourſelves, and enter into talk with one another, while *God's moſt holy word* is reading to you. It is true, you can read it at home. But whether you do or not, he and your own conſciences beſt know. Or if you do: ſo you can ſermons too. And this would be an excuſe equally, for not attending, or not regarding, either of them. But ſtill, this is the place, in which your Lord and maſter hath commanded you to hear both: and hath promiſed to be *in the midſt of you* *, and bleſs his ordinances to you, if you uſe them as you ought. And what then is your duty in ſuch a caſe?

There are many things in the leſſons perhaps, that you do not underſtand: many, which, though you do underſtand them, yield you very little inſtruction or benefit. But attend to them diligently, weigh them deliberately, think how you may profit by them, conſult proper perſons, or books if

* Matth xviii. 20.

if you can, about them: and, by quick degrees, you will both apprehend your Bible better, and eſteem it more; and reap ſuch good from it, as probably you never imagined. At leaſt you will have done your utmoſt: and God will except and reward you. I have given you directions, at large, for the profitable reading of ſcripture, which may be applied, in a great meaſure, to hearing it, and muſt not now be repeated. But the principal direction is, *Receive the ſeed of the word into an honeſt and good heart:* and you will certainly *bring forth fruit, with patience,* unto everlaſting life *. Say within yourſelves at the beginning, with *Samuel, ſpeak, Lord, for thy ſervant heareth* †. Say of the more difficult parts, with *David, open mine eyes, that I may ſee the wondrous things of thy law* ‡. Say of thoſe, that try your faith, with the poor man in the goſpel, *Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief* §. Say of thoſe, that direct your practice, with the people of *Iſrael, all that the Lord hath ſpoken, we will do* ||. And be aſſured of becoming, though not ſkilful in curious, which St Paul ſtiles *fooliſh, and unlearned, queſtions* ¶ and *doubtful diſputations* ⁂; yet, what is infinitely better, humble and pious, and *wiſe unto ſalvation* ⁂.

To each leſſon ſucceeds a hymn or pſalm: conformably to a decree of the council of Laodicea, 1400 years ago, that the public reading of God's word ſhould be mixed with repeating his praiſes: a moſt rational combination, as well as refreſhing change.

The hymn, called *Te Deum,* derives that name from the firſt words of it in the Latin: in which language it was compoſed, about the middle of the fourth century; and hath been uſed by the whole Weſtern church, at leaſt 1200 years: in that of Rome, only on Sundays and holydays, and not all thoſe; but in ours every day, as the ſingular excellence of it well deſerves. It begins with equal majeſty and ſimplicity: *We praiſe thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.* And not we alone, but *all the earth doth worſhip thee, the Father everlaſting:* every corner of it having retained ſome apprehenſions of a ſupreme ruler; on which is founded that of St Paul to the *Athenians, whom therefore ye ignorantly wor-*

* Matt. xiii. 23. Luke viii. 15. † 1 Sam. iii. 10. ‡ Pſal. cxix. 18. § Mark ix. 24. || Exod. xix. 8. ¶ 2 Tim. ii. 23. ⁂ Rom. xiv. 1. ⁂ 2 Tim. iii. 15.

*ſhip, him declare I unto you**. But unſpeakably worthier honours, than thoſe of poor mortals, are inceſſantly paid him in heaven by the holy angels; mentioned in Scripture, and thence here, under the names of *Cherubin and Seraphim;* the former denoting probably their unwearied diligence to ſerve him, the latter their ardent love to him: whoſe acclamations therefore we humbly preſume to adopt, as we find them recorded in that lofty deſcription of the prophet. *I ſaw the Lord, ſitting upon the throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it ſtood the ſeraphims: and one cried unto another and ſaid, holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hoſts: the whole earth is full of his glory*†. Where it muſt be obſerved, that for *God of hoſts* in the prophet, is *God of Sabaoth* in the hymn; the latter being the Hebrew word for the former: which both the Greek and Latin of the Old and New Teſtament having preſerved, as comprehending more than could be well expreſſed by a ſingle term of any other language; it is preſerved in the Engliſh alſo, both here, and in two places of the epiſtles ‡. And it ſignifies God to be the ſovereign Lord, of the *innumerable company of angels* §; of the hoſt of heaven, which the heathen worſhipped, the ſun, moon and ſtars; of the hoſts and armies of all nations on earth; particularly the Jewiſh people, whom he led forth to battle; and laſtly, of the Chriſtian church: which the Old Teſtament foretold ſhould be *terrible, as an army with banners* ‖; and the New deſcribes, as furniſhed with *weapons of warfare, mighty, through God, to the caſting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalted itſelf againſt the knowledge of him, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Chriſt* ¶. This therefore the phraſe, *Lord God of Sabaoth*, means: not, as many imagine, (though it be a truth, but a very inferior one) that God is peculiarly *Lord of the Sabbath* day. For the words are intirely different in the original, though ſomewhat alike in our manner of writing them.

Nor are the praiſes of God ſung in heaven by the angels alone, but by *the ſpirits* alſo *of juſt men made perfect*†; particularly,

* Acts xvii. 23. † Iſa. vi. 1, 2, 3. ‡ Rom. ix. 29. James v. 4.
§ Heb. xii. 22. ‖ Cant. vi. 4, 10. ¶ 2 Cor. x. 4, 5.
Mark ii. 28. Luke vi. 5. † Heb. xii. 23.

cularly, as we go on to ſpecify, *the apoſtles; prophets and martyrs:* with whom the *holy church*, yet militant, *throughout the world* aſpires to join, in celebrating *the Father of an infinite majeſty; his honourable, true, and only Son*, compared with whom, the higheſt of all created beings is unworthy of that name; *alſo the Holy Ghoſt, the comforter* of every pious ſoul. Then returning to *the Captain of our ſalvation* * we thankfully own, that *when he took upon him to deliver man* from ſin and its puniſhment, *he did not abhor*, and diſdain, as beneath him, the condeſcenſion of exchanging the glories of the Godhead *for the virgin's womb*; and *when he had overcome the ſharpneſs of death*, for us, by ſuffering it himſelf, (which alludes to the words, *O death where is thy ſting* †? *He opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.* Not that we mean to ſay, it was not open at all till then; whatever ſome ancient fathers may have held ‡: any more, than that *life and immortality* were not at all *brought to light* before *the goſpel* §. But as the light, which men had antecedently to our Saviour's coming, was augmented inexpreſſibly by it: ſo the kingdom of heaven was ſet open vaſtly wider, in conſequence of his ſufferings, to receive believers, not from one people only, and their neighbours, but the whole globe. To him therefore, our Mediator, now *at the right hand of God*, and who *ſhall come to be our Judge*, we addreſs our prayers; that as *we magnify him day by day*, (and let us take care to make good that aſſertion) ſo he would keep us *this* and every *day without ſin;* reſtrain us from offending through infirmity, as far as will be really for our inward benefit, but eſpecially from wilful and preſumptuous tranſgreſſion; and that his *mercy* may *lighten*, that is, light or come *upon us, as our truſt is in him.*

Inſtead of the *Te Deum*, another canticle, or ſong of praiſe, much ancienter, and even more anciently inſerted into the offices of the church, is allowed to be ſubſtituted: which, from the firſt word of it in the Latin, bears the name of *Benedicite*; and is taken from the apocryphal part of the book of Daniel, where it is put into the mouth of thoſe, who are commonly

* Heb. ii. 10. † 1 Cor. xv. 55.

‡ Iræn. Tert. Athanaſ. Hieron. Aug. Ambr. Baſil. Greg. Thaum. Cyril Hieroſ. et Alex. See Suicer in ψυχη.

§ 2 Tim. i. 10.

called the three children, or young men, whom Nebuchadnezzar *caſt into the fiery furnace* *. It is now very ſeldom uſed, at leaſt in parochial churches: but however contains a noble acknowledgment of the glory of God in his works of creation, the memorial of which was the original deſign of the Sabbath day; and might be juſtly preferred to the former, whenever there is particular occaſion to return thanks for the bleſſings of nature. An objection indeed hath been ſtarted, that in it we pray to the *angels and ſpirits of the righteous*, to *bleſs the Lord*. And it might as well have been objected, that we pray to the *winds and fire, the froſts and ſnow*, to bleſs him. Plainly all this is no more than a figure of ſpeech, though a very ſublime one: lending as it were a tongue even to inanimate creatures, and calling both on thoſe which do not, and thoſe which cannot, hear us, to glorify our common Maker; juſt as is done in the 148th pſalm, of which this canticle is an evident imitation.

After the ſecond leſſon, is appointed, either the prophecy of Zacharias in St Luke, or the 100th pſalm: called, for the reaſon which I mentioned before, *Benedictus* and *Jubilate*. The former was uttered on the birth of John the Baptiſt: and is a thankſgiving for the redemption of mankind, of which he was to publiſh the ſpeedy approach. It copies very nearly the ſtile of the Jewiſh prophets, who deſcribed ſpiritual bleſſings by temporal images. Thus, meaning to praiſe *the Father of mercies* † for delivering all nations from the dominion of the wicked one, it *bleſſes the Lord God of Iſrael, for ſaving his people from their enemies, and the hand of thoſe that hate them*. Now this kind of language was laid aſide after our Saviour's aſcenſion: and therefore the prophecy before us is not of later date, but genuine. Yet it ſufficiently explains, to what ſort of *ſalvation* it refers: by mentioning the *remiſſion of ſins, the giving of light to them that ſat in darkneſs, and guiding their feet into the way of peace*. And ſo it may teach us both the fitneſs, and the method, of aſſigning to the Old Teſtament predictions an evangelic interpretation. You will be ſure, in repeating it, to remember, that the words, *And thou, child, ſhalt be called the prophet of the Higheſt*, belong not to our Saviour, but the Baptiſt. And you will eaſily apprehend,

* Dan. iii. 23. † 2 Cor. i. 3.

hend, that if in the dawning, which preceded the *Sun of righteouſneſs* *, good Zacharias offered up his thanks with ſuch tranſport, we, to whom he ſhines out in full ſplendor, ought to recite it with double gratitude.

The 100th pſalm, which, being ſomewhat ſhorter, and the ſervice long, we uſe the more frequently, is peculiarly proper after a leſſon from the goſpel, ſince it peculiarly relates to the goſpel times: as appears from its inviting *all lands to be joyful in the Lord*, declaring them equally *God's people, and the ſheep of his paſture*, and calling on them equally *to go into his gates, and praiſe him for his mercy and truth.* And may we all accordingly ſo *praiſe* and ſerve him *in his courts* here below, that we may for ever *dwell in his tabernacle and reſt on his holy hill* † above, through Jeſus Chriſt our Lord, &c.

* Mal. iv. 2. † Pſal. xv. 1.

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